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Marc Wong and his wife, Daniela, are planning a legacy gift to The New York Community Trust to bring live music to those with limited ability to access it themselves, including older adults and those who are incarcerated. Photo at the Tilles Center for the Performing Arts in Brookville, Long Island, by Ari Mintz.

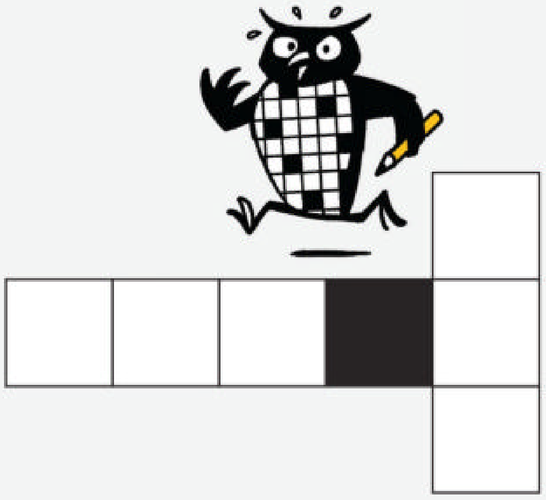
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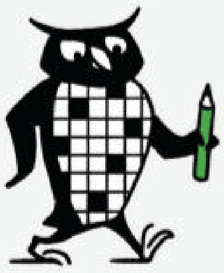
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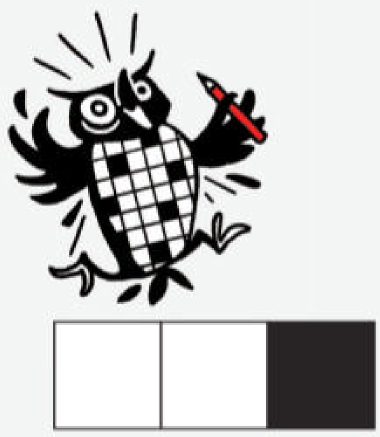




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Masha Titova (*Cover*) is an artist and printmaker from Moscow.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



CULTURAL COMMENT
Michael Schulman says goodbye to one of contemporary TV's great characters—"Succession"'s Kendall Roy.



THE WEEKEND ESSAY
Jay Caspian Kang writes that, of his past hundred tennis matches, he has lost roughly ninety.

LEFT: MACALL B. POLAY / COURTESY HBO; RIGHT: VICENTE MUÑOZ

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THE MAIL

ABORTION AFTER ROE

I am an abortion provider based in Buffalo who was interviewed by Eyal Press for his article about Planned Parenthood's treatment of independent abortion clinics ("The Planned Parenthood Problem," May 15th). As Press notes, I am the only out-of-hospital provider of comprehensive second-trimester-abortion care in the area. A few days before Press's article was published, I received a letter from a law firm that represents Planned Parenthood of Central and Western New York. The letter threatened legal action against me for alleged defamatory statements that were published on the Web site of my practice, Buffalo Women Services.

At the time, the site included statements about Planned Parenthood's clinical offerings which contained information that had been corroborated by a Planned Parenthood employee. All of this information had been there for around three years, during which I had never received a complaint from Planned Parenthood. I immediately removed any mention of the organization from the site; I am a physician, not a wealthy corporation, and I cannot afford a lawsuit, which the letter indicated might follow if I did not comply with the firm's requests. But I can't imagine how threatening to sue a fellow abortion provider could be in line with the mission of expanding access to reproductive-health care.

Katharine Morrison, M.D.
Buffalo, N.Y.

As a lawyer and a longtime abortion-rights activist, one recent development that I think is worth pointing out in the context of Press's piece is the adoption of telemedicine-abortion shield laws. As of this month, state-licensed abortion providers in Massachusetts, Colorado, Washington, and Vermont have some protection from being prosecuted for providing abortion services via telemedicine across state lines. (Although these laws do not directly protect patients in states where abortion is banned or criminalized, they do facilitate access to safe, certified medication from a licensed medical provider and assure patients that the abortion-friendly state will not participate in criminal or civil investigations.) After a telemedicine appointment, a patient who is eligible for medication abortion may be prescribed the appropriate drugs. Such services usually require a payment of at least a hundred and fifty dollars, which can be made online. The medication, which can be given out in the first eleven weeks of pregnancy, can arrive at the patient's home within three days. In the post-Roe era, creating and raising public awareness about options for abortion that don't entail the expenses or the stigma of travel is essential.

Julie F. Kay
Brooklyn, N.Y.

ON BEING A GHOSTWRITER

I enjoyed J. R. Moehringer's essay about working on Prince Harry's memoir ("The Ghostwriter," May 15th). I have made a living ghostwriting for the past twelve years, and have often been asked what it's like—in particular, what it feels like to see someone else's name on a book I wrote. I usually answer that, from the first meeting with the author until the completion of the final draft, being a ghostwriter is like being a full-time nanny employed by someone (the author) to raise their child (the book). I become part of the family—an insider, someone my employer comes to trust and grow fond of. And then the kid grows up, and it's time for the parents to introduce their grown child to the world. With any luck, the world will tell them what a smart, funny, interesting, sympathetic person they raised. And me? I will be blown sideways to a new place, to raise another kid.

Karen Rizzo
Los Angeles, Calif.

•

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The Memphis rapper **GloRilla,** braced by a resonant voice and a punchy repertoire, strode triumphantly into the summer of 2022 with "F.N.F. (Let's Go)," a liberated, no-scrubs anthem that announced her star potential. Now Grammy-nominated and with a Top Ten single to her name, GloRilla sets out to conquer yet another summer—starting with Hot 97's Summer Jam, at UBS Arena on June 4. The packed lineup also includes Cardi B, Ice Spice, Coi Leray, Lola Brooke, and a celebration of hip-hop's fiftieth anniversary.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROSE MARIE CROMWELL

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

THE THEATRE

Bernarda's Daughters

Diane Exavier's drama, inspired by Federico García Lorca's "La Casa de Bernarda Alba," is set entirely within an Edwardian house in Brooklyn's gentrifying Flatbush neighborhood. The play's single location belies its scope: Exavier ranges through history, conjoining Haitian Creole-inflected Black English and a stage poetry of her own making. Dominique Rider's direction accommodates both the detailed realism of Rodrigo Muñoz's costumes and the abstract expressiveness of Marika Kent's light strips, red in the summer heat and a cool lavender at dawn. But the play's theme, like its setting, remains constant, maybe because the setting *is* the theme—property, and the power that it entails. The house's inhabitants are a Haitian American family: five daughters, their mother (who's away, burying her recently deceased husband in Haiti), and her mother. The performances in this world-première production, from National Black Theatre and the New Group, are as searing as Exavier's indictment of America.—*Dan Stahl (Pershing Square Signature Center; through June 4.)*

King James

Before the play starts, DJ (Khloe Janel) bathes the house with pop and R. & B. from the early two-thousands, but the work itself begins with Marvin Gaye's "Star-Spangled Banner," which preceded the 1983 N.B.A. All-Star Game. That soulful reconstruction of the problematic anthem is a proper reflection of the playwright Rajiv Joseph's take on America's obsession with success, idolatry, delusion, and disillusion. Shawn (Glenn Davis) and Matt (Chris Perfetti), two Clevelanders, forge an unlikely friendship in 2004, based on their mutual enthusiasm for LeBron James, in his rookie year with the Cavaliers. Joseph explores the racial, cultural, and economic strains on their bond through the lens of LeBron's career—as the player abandons the city, in 2010, to, as he said, take his "talents to South Beach," only to return, six years later, and lead the Cavs to a championship. Directed by Kenny Leon, for Manhattan Theatre Club, Davis (the artistic director of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre, where the play premièred) and Perfetti ("Abbott Elementary") achieve a fine, funny rhythm with their basketball banter and hit the requisite dramatic notes when things get complicated.—*Ken Marks (City Center Stage 1; through June 18.)*

Monsoon Wedding

Translating a film to the stage stumps even the great Mira Nair, who conceived and directed this musical adaptation of her stunning 2001 film. It's a violation of texture, not plot, since the book writers, Arpita Mukherjee and Sabrina Dhawan (who wrote the screenplay), don't much overhaul the updated story: love of all kinds still blooms at the festivities for the arranged marriage of Hemant (Deven Kolluri) and Aditi (Salena Qureshi), which has drawn their far-flung families to New Delhi. Nair plays productively with multilingualism and intermedia: in one instance, the wedding contractor PK Dubey (Namit Das) imagines himself in a Bollywood fantasy; David Bengali's projections show him in goofy, heroic slo-mo. But the original's humid vigor has been too much leached away. Songs baldly state thoughts that once glimmered in subtext, and Aditi has been flattened from a sensualist to a caricature. The show does end with an exhilarating group number, but it's telling that Nair chooses a song from the movie, Sukhwinder Singh and Mychael Danna's "Aaj Mera Jee Kardaa (Kaava Kaava)," rather than anything by this musical's team—the composer Vishal Bhardwaj and the lyricists Masi Asare and Susan Birkenhead have not themselves made a particularly happy match.—*Helen Shaw (St. Ann's Warehouse; through June 25.)*

Primary Trust

Eboni Booth's delicate, dream-quiet play is a character study in search of a character: thirty-eight-year-old Kenneth (William Jackson Harper, astonishing on the edge of tears) certainly has traits—such as his belief in an imaginary friend (Eric Berryman) and a dependence on a local Tiki bar (where every waitstaff member is played by April Matthis)—but in order to develop, Kenneth would need to make choices, which he's too traumatized to do. Booth gives him time, though, and he eventually establishes a toehold on life, aided by kindly folk in his small town, including a warmhearted waitress (Matthis again) and his new boss (Jay O. Sanders). Booth and the director, Knud Adams, deploy various classic techniques (Kenneth recalls the stage manager in "Our Town"; the musician Luke Wygodny rings a call bell periodically, like a Buddhist mindfulness chime) to create a timeless mood. That mood remains fragile and sad. Extraordinary performances

ON TELEVISION

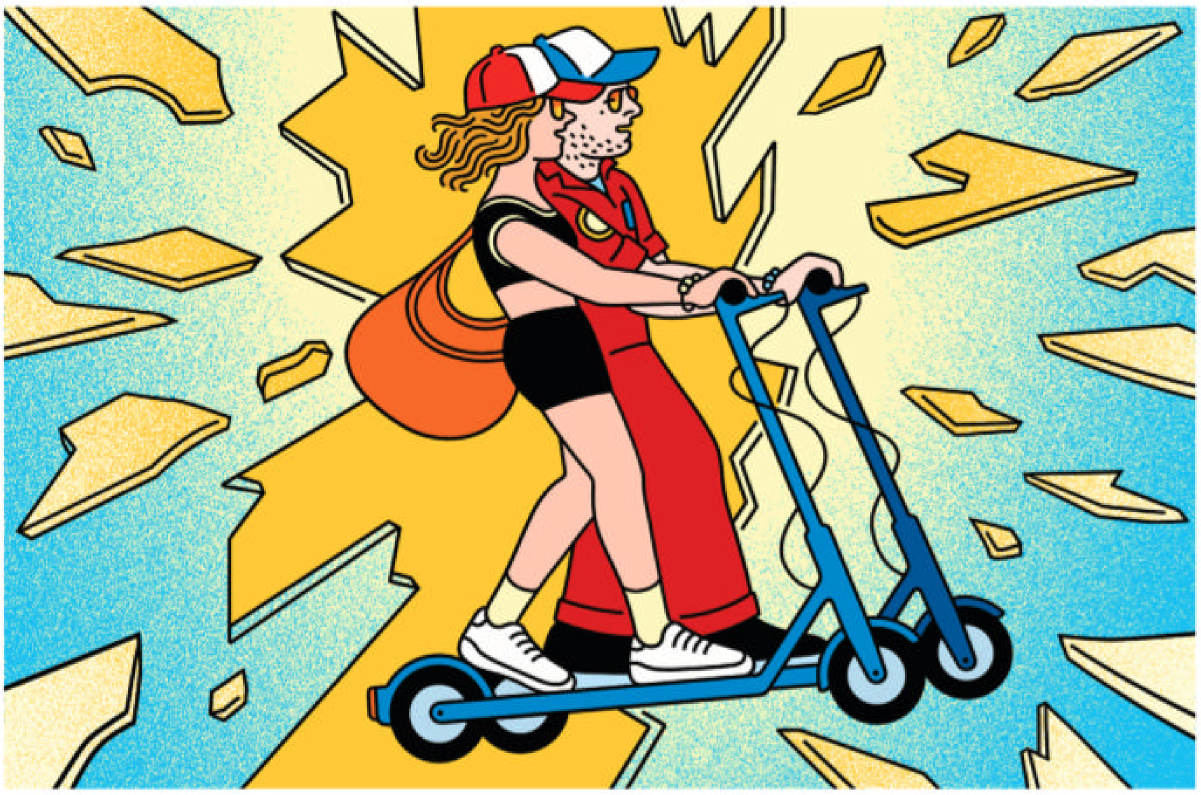


ILLUSTRATION BY TOMI UM

Nora Ephron's iconic romantic comedy "When Harry Met Sally," from 1989, posed the age-old question of whether a heterosexual man and a heterosexual woman can ever be just friends—and came down staunchly on the side of "nope!" **"Platonic,"** a new comedy series on Apple TV+, goes the other way. The show, created by Nicholas Stoller, stars Rose Byrne and Seth Rogen (reunited after playing a married couple in Stoller's "Neighbors" films) as Sylvia and Will, a pair of old drinking buddies who have fallen out of touch. In the meantime, their lives have accrued emotional mass: Sylvia is married with children and feeling restless, Will is schlumping through a painful divorce. When the two reconnect, they give each other permission to lean into improvidence; they get high, they destroy property, they carouse. The one thing they do not do is sleep together; this is a show about lost youth, not lost love. It is always good to see Rogen, who has emerged lately as a kind of majordomo of chill (see his Instagram devoted to his weed business and his ceramic creations), but the show really belongs to Byrne, who is at her best when she plays a woman severely in need of a good time.—*Rachel Syme*

AT THE GALLERIES



The ecstatic new paintings by the self-schooled **Uman** have more colors than colors have names. Her star-making début at the Nicola Vassell gallery—"I Want Everything Now," on view through June 17—is similarly overflowing. The fifty works on canvas and paper shift in subject from mystical inner visions and illicit midnight trysts to a South African form of house music that inspired a TikTok craze ("Amapiano Dance," pictured above). The exhibition's flowing psychic terrain echoes that of the fiercely creative artist herself, who was born in Somalia, grew up in Kenya and Denmark, made her way to New York City, around 2000, and is now settled upstate. Uman's intuitive, relentless, joyful approach has something in common with that of Yayoi Kusama, whose latest "Infinity Room" has visitors waiting for hours—meanwhile, around the corner, with no line in sight, new limitless pleasures await.—*Andrea K. Scott*

and this fogbound atmosphere are the show's chief pleasures: every detail has been tended to, from the reduced-scale Main Street set to the way Sanders, popping up as a French waiter, blows out a match. *Puff!* He makes a miniature production around a dying light.—*H.S. (Laura Pels; through July 2.)*

DANCE

Ballet Hispánico

One look at Ballet Hispánico's dancers—versatile, strong, reflecting various cultural and dance backgrounds—says a lot about the excellence of this dance company and its mission of promoting Latin American culture. Its City Center program is just as diverse. It includes a new work, by Michelle Manzanales, inspired by the life of the seventeenth-century Mexican nun and scholar Sor Juana; another new piece, "Papagayos," by the former Hispánico dancer Omar Román De Jesús, toys with ideas about power and the absurd. And, in "New Sleep (Duet)," the dancers slip into the brash and streamlined contemporary language of William Forsythe, with its audacious partnering and its forceful use of point technique.—*Marina Harss (City Center; June 1-3.)*

Yoshiko Chuma

For decades, Chuma has been presenting sui-generis works—messy collages of dance, music, film, and other media which often confront political issues. The latest, "Shockwave Delay," considers the polar concepts of utopia and war, the global and the local. The cast is drawn from a supersized pool of dancers, artists, musicians, and actors—including Jim Fletcher, Kate Valk, and the poet Eileen Myles—who appear in different combinations for each two-and-a-half-hour performance.—*Brian Seibert (La Mama; June 1-11.)*

Gallim

Andrea Miller's company is now fifteen, and its anniversary season at the Joyce features some special guests. Brian Henry, also known as HallowDreamz, a New York master of the intense West Coast street form krump, débuts a solo made in collaboration with Miller and accompanied by the abstract expressionist Sharone Halevy, who paints live. Chalvar Monteiro, a standout with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, brings his suave charm to a duet set to Sade's "No Ordinary Love." The remainder of the program samples Miller's Gaga-influenced repertory, including a revision of "Fold Here," which explores the physical and metaphorical possibilities of cardboard boxes.—*B.S. (Joyce Theatre; May 31-June 4.)*

Madeline Hollander

A ballet dancer who transformed herself into a cross between a visual artist and a choreographer, Hollander is no stranger to museums, having created site-specific, concept-driven, systems-investigating performances at the Whitney, among other institutions. "Hydro Parade," her first work at the Met, is what it sounds like: a fluid procession between galleries housing fountains, pools, and other water features, which also traces the natural springs running underneath.—*B.S. (Metropolitan Museum of Art; June 3, June 10, and June 17.)*

Kaatsbaan Spring Festival

The outdoor stage at Kaatsbaan, set up in the middle of a field in Tivoli, New York, on the grounds of a former horse farm, is a pretty idyllic place to see performances as the light fades beyond the trees. This year's spring festival spans three weekends. On June 3-4, the Limón Dance Company splits a bill with the aspiring professionals of American Ballet Theatre's Studio Company. On June 11, Trisha Brown Dance Company performs Brown's 2011 work "Rogues." But the most intriguing program is a new, evening-length work (June 17-18) that will span the center's indoor and outdoor spaces: "WE" is a collaboration between Emily Coates, a former New York City Ballet dancer, and the French Cambodian dancer and choreographer Emmanuele Phuon. (The two met at Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project.) Their dance is a meditation on nature and ecology which combines the highly codified language of Cambodian classical dance with the more freewheeling, improvisational ideas of postmodern dance.—*M.H. (Kaatsbaan Cultural Park, Tivoli, N.Y.; June 2-18.)*

ART

Emmanuel Louisnord Desir

In "Ashes of Zion," a show of twenty-three riveting new works, this Los Angeles-based artist weaves richly layered critical narratives about the origins, and the inheritances, of the African diaspora. Here, he brings characters from the Bible—a book full of tales about the exiled and the enslaved—together with earthly figures, animals, and objects. Paintings in oil on burnt-wood panels depict such unsettling scenes as Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac and a three-headed archangel wielding a sword over a small soul afloat in the sea. In the gallery's back room, a wide plinth displays twelve small bronze sculptures that Desir calls "Spoils"—haunting hybrids of reptiles, jewelry, and hardware intertwined with Black heads. The show's mytho-apocalyptic subjects feel most personal in "Grandpa's Infirmity Couch," from 2022, a stately

© UMAN / COURTESY THE ARTIST / NICOLA VASSELL GALLERY

piece in carved wood and 3-D-printed resin. Handfuls of shiny silver dollars are scattered where the elder might otherwise be seated—a heart-wrenching acknowledgment of ancestors whose legacies have been valued solely in terms of capital.—*Jennifer Krasinski (47 Canal; through June 10.)*

Les Levine

A true maverick, even by avant-garde standards, this eighty-seven-year-old self-dubbed "media sculptor" dazzles with a spectacle-of-no-spectacle. Blank Forms gallery presents a new iteration of Levine's project "Watergate Fashions," from 1973, for which he watched the daily Senate-committee hearings on television, diligently writing descriptions of the participants' outfits. The space is empty save for two stereo speakers, hanging in opposite corners; a third speaker is stowed behind a door left ajar. Rows of red-gelled fluorescent lights overhead overwhelm the eye, while delivering a stealthy punch line: Nothing to see here. What fills the space instead is a forty-seven-minute audio recording of Levine's sartorial notes, which he recites in a tone so deadpan as to suggest rigor mortis. From Tuesday, June 12, 1973: "Herbert Porter. Tan Suit. Red-white-and-dark-blue diagonally striped tie. Striped suit. Charles Murray. Gray suit. Blue tie. Pale-blue shirt." And so on. Call this work's genre "the discursive immersive"—but immersing us in what? The semiotic potential of patterned ties? The bland palette favored by power? Or, most likely, a perverse nostalgia for the seemingly simpler political corruptions of yore. Perhaps that's one good thing about the endless loop of human folly: at least Levine's art will never go out of style.—*J.K. (Blank Forms; through June 10.)*

MUSIC

Indigo Girls

FOLK When Amy Ray and Emily Saliers, guitarists, singers, and lifelong friends, reunited at Emory University, in 1985, they committed to making folk rock together, with the latter's subtlety offsetting the former's more anthemic tendencies. When the Indigo Girls rose to prominence, on an eighties wave of singer-songwriters, the group became a revolutionary addition to the folk-duo tradition—an understated, queer activist team amid unbridled music-industry excess. The partnership has yielded a gleaming fifteen-LP catalogue, extended as recently as 2020. The singers, for their part, have remained low-key throughout: "I don't even think about being an Indigo Girl unless I'm getting interviewed about it," Saliers once told *Spin.* But onstage, side by side, they are activated.—*Sheldon Pearce (City Parks Foundation SummerStage in Central Park; June 4.)*

The Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis: "The Jazz Ambassadors"

JAZZ In the Cold War-chilled late fifties, the world needed to know that freedom was the byword of the United States. Jazz—creative, spontaneous, and ostensibly integrated—fit the bill perfectly, and in 1956 Washington began sponsoring international tours by some of the genre's most popular artists. Dizzy Gillespie, Dave Brubeck, and, eventually, Duke Ellington hit the road on the government's dime, spreading good vibes and, in turn, soaking up far-flung musical influences. In "The Jazz Ambassadors: Duke, Dizzy, and Brubeck," the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra reminds us of the period by dipping into the diverse repertoires of the three iconic figures. Given the impact of the musicians' sojourns on their subsequent projects, work from Ellington's epochal "Far East Suite," Brubeck's "Jazz Impressions of Eurasia," and Gillespie's omnivorous global mashups are likely on the menu.—*Steve Futterman (Rose Theatre; June 1-3.)*

La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela: "Just Charles"

EXPERIMENTAL Since their meeting, in 1962, the pioneering minimalist musician La Monte Young and the light artist Marian Zazeela have operated as an iconic duo of the avant-garde, conjuring meticulous tonalities across extended durations. The husband-and-wife team performed in Young's influential Theatre of Eternal Music and founded the violet-hued Dream House, the meditative sound-and-light environment based, since 1993, in Tribeca. Not far from Dream House, these SoHo concerts find the couple's longtime collaborator, the cellist Charles Curtis, presenting the 2003 composition "Just Charles & Cello in the Romantic Chord." Prepared by Young for Curtis, who also works in sustained drones, the piece is an elaboration on one section of Young's monumental, ever-evolving project "The Well-Tuned Piano." Rendered with the exacting tunings known as "just intonation," the music is accompanied by Zazeela's light installation, featuring her signature metamorphosing calligraphy and saturated, shifting projections.—*Jenn Pelly (Peter Freeman, Inc.; June 2 and June 4.)*

Optimo

ELECTRONIC Calling the Glaswegian d.j. duo Optimo's work simply "dance music" is to severely shortchange it. Even when playing for a crowded, moving floor, JG Twitch (né Keith McIvor) and Johnnie Wilkes are likely to take a hard left turn into something that few would consider a typical dance track. They also keep on pushing the groove in progress—though, even there, the pair's flair for the unexpected remains. At this Brooklyn venue's new outdoor space, Optimo is joined on the bill by Paul Nickerson, of Dope Jams.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Public Records; June 4.)*

Orchestra of St. Luke's

CLASSICAL The pianist and writer Jeremy Denk, a Bach interpreter of refined warmth and insight, spent much of last year touring his interpretation of Book 1 of the composer's mammoth "Well-Tempered Clavier." Perhaps with completism on his mind, Denk tackles the first six of Bach's keyboard concertos—works of graceful color and appealing vigor—with the Orchestra of St. Luke's, on June 6. The ensemble's three-part Bach Festival, built around guest soloists, also features Gil Shaham in violin concertos (June 13) and, on June 20, the countertenor Hugh Cutting in a cantata, along with a handful of showy Handel arias.—*Oussama Zahr (Zankel Hall; June 6, June 13, and June 20.)*

MOVIES

The Little Mermaid

This amiable live-action remake of the 1989 animated musical intelligently infuses

FESTIVAL



ILLUSTRATION BY BEN PEARCE

Now in its twelfth year, **Blue Note Jazz Festival** pushes past the boundaries of genre and setting suggested by its name. Much of the action moves beyond its downtown home, starting from the sizzling opening bell: Grace Jones, a uniquely severe singer who, by all appearances, was incubated in Jamaica, Studio 54, and the third moon of Jupiter. She headlines Hammerstein Ballroom on May 31, bringing a vampiric chill to a contemporary pop landscape predicated on the impression of personability. Subsequent nights star Chucho Valdés & Paquito D'Rivera, NxWorries, and Talib Kweli. And on June 18, at SummerStage, the festival hosts the type of blues summit unlikely to be seen again, as Buddy Guy fronts a meaty lineup billed not merely as the guitarist's goodbye—this is his "Damn Right Farewell."—*Jay Ruttenberg*

plausible context into the familiar fantasy. Halle Bailey stars as Ariel, a songful young mermaid who yearns to live onshore. When she rescues a handsome young sailor, Prince Eric (Jonah Hauer-King), from a shipwreck, they're instantly smitten, but Eric returns to his island castle, and Ariel returns to the sea. There, she's ensnared by Ursula (Melissa McCarthy), a sea witch who, in an evil plot against Ariel's father, King Triton (Javier Bardem), gives her legs in exchange for her voice. Eric, heir to the throne of his mother (Noma Dumezweni), is portrayed as a modernizer who defies his people's fear of mermaids even as Triton must overcome his terror of fish-eating humans. Bailey's potent, intense singing enlivens Ariel's yearnings; the mermaid's companions (crab, seagull, and fish) are ably voiced by Daveed Diggs, Awkwafina, and Jacob Tremblay; and new songs (with lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda) mesh with the original ones, by Alan Menken and the late Howard Ashman. Rob Marshall's direction is stolid, the C.G.I. artifices are often distracting, and the cartoon version's eeriest visions are filtered out; nonetheless, the story, the music, and the performances deliver earnest cheer and charm.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release.)*

A New Leaf

Elaine May's antic and macabre 1971 comedy reveals the essence of marital love more brutally than many melodramas. Walter Matthau plays Henry Graham, an effete and idle Manhattan heir; the film opens with a loopy view of Henry's caprices, notably his red Ferrari. But he's stopped cold by the news—delivered in riotous euphemisms by his lawyer (William Redfield)—that he's broke. After a terrifying vision of having to buy ready-to-wear, he accepts a usurious loan from his sneering uncle (James Coco) and must marry rich, fast. Henry impresses his chosen prey, Henrietta Lowell (May), an awkward, lonely heiress and a botanist, with his displays of chivalry. In anticipation of the big day, Henry also studies botany—and, with unchivalrous intent, studies toxicology, too. With his imperious managerial style, he puts her chaotic household in order—because he plans to inherit it, sooner rather than later. Having started out with the hatred, dependency, and surrender that it takes most couples years to achieve, Henry and Henrietta thereby prove as suited as regular folks for marriage until death do them part—one way or another.—*R.B. (Playing June 3 and June 5 at Film Forum and streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

SLC Punk!

A messy but engaging look at the punk scene in Salt Lake City during the Reagan years; that may sound a little specialized, but how many of us knew there ever was a punk scene—or even a single punk—in the home of the Mormons? The star of this comedic 1998 drama is Matthew Lillard, who, here, outgrew his "Scream" persona; the frustrated wrath of his teen-age character, Stevo, is finely offset by the actor's gangling sweetness. The whole movie, indeed, is a wry look back at rebellion; how can you hope to change the world, the movie asks, when it's far too much trouble to change your hair style, let alone your girlfriend? The director, James Merendino, likes to play up his busy visual habits, as if to cover the slow patches in the plot, and he can't quite rid himself of a weakness for voice-over; yet his film grows unexpectedly touching, as Stevo's friendship with the clueless Bob (Michael Goorjian)—like the panicky era in which they have thrived—comes to a cold and tranquil end.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 4/19/99.) (Streaming on Vudu, Google Play, and other services.)*

The Third Generation

The Baader-Meinhof gang's attacks provide the backdrop for Rainer Werner Fassbinder's hectic, funny, prismatically intricate political thriller, from 1979. It begins with a high-rolling businessman (Eddie Constantine), in a chilling modern office high above Berlin, at work with his assistant (Hanna Schygulla), who turns out to be a mole from a revolutionary cell that is plotting spectacular crimes. The teeming cast includes a cynical police detective (Hark Bohm) whose son (Udo Kier) is one of the plotters, and a drug addict (Y Sa Lo) who brings an Army explosives specialist (Günther Kaufmann) into the group. Slapstick comedy (including a game of keep-away with a volume of Bakunin) and oddball habits (the terrorists dress like prewar gangsters and play Monopoly) blend with wild visions and grandiose philosophical speculations. The film's intertitles are taken from bathroom graffiti; its cinematic references (to Bresson, Tarkovsky, and, especially, Godard) are clever and apt, and the few action scenes are filmed with a razor-sharp pulp efficacy. Fassbinder's blend of paranoia and whiz-bang wonder is the modern successor to Fritz Lang's "Dr. Mabuse" films.—*R.B. (Playing June 2-4 at Anthology Film Archives and streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

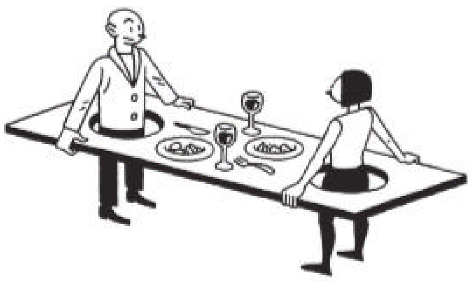
ON THE BIG SCREEN



ALAMY

"Do Not Detonate," a series of works that inspired Wes Anderson's new movie "Asteroid City," opens June 2, at Museum of the Moving Image, with Vincente Minnelli's 1958 melodrama **"Some Came Running."** Like Anderson's film, Minnelli's portrays a disparate batch of outsiders who converge on a small town. It stars Frank Sinatra in the hardboiled role of Dave Hirsh, a once-promising writer, freshly discharged from military service, who returns home and makes trouble in the (fictitious) town of Parkman, Indiana—alongside Ginnie Moorehead (Shirley MacLaine), the Hollywood stereotype of a floozy with a heart of gold. The cast of characters also includes Bama Dillert (Dean Martin), a hard-drinking gambler; Gwen French (Martha Hyer), a schoolteacher with keen literary judgment and stern moral judgment; Dave's spirited but disillusioned niece, Dawn (Betty Lou Keim); and his brother, Frank (Arthur Kennedy), a pillar of the community and a first-class phony. The volatile blend of these lusty personalities leads to romantic entanglements and violent conflicts; Minnelli, like Anderson, revels in the alluring decorative artifices of small-town life, which nonetheless seethe with passions that shatter the surface of decorum.—*Richard Brody*





TABLES FOR TWO

Superiority Burger
119 Avenue A

At 9 P.M. one recent Saturday at Superiority Burger, the chef Brooks Headley was ricocheting around the dining room. A profile in *GQ* revealed that he clocked about thirty-five thousand steps, or roughly seventeen miles, each night. And who could blame him? For six years, he spent the majority of his time in the three hundred square feet of the restaurant's original location. Earlier this year, he relocated to the relatively sprawling space that, for decades, had housed the Odessa Restaurant, a beloved East Village greasy spoon.

The original Superiority Burger offered just six dishes, plus specials and desserts. (Headley began his kitchen career as a fine-dining pastry chef.) All of it, including the eponymous burger, was vegetarian; a lot was "accidentally vegan." Everything popped. The move, theoretically, might have overwhelmed Headley with possibilities, but on recent visits I was delighted to find that he is keeping the focus as tight as ever.

There are cocktails now, expertly made but nothing you'd use the word "craft" to describe. On my first visit, as I waited at the bar for a table, I enjoyed a Cape Cod, with real cranberry juice and supremely carbonated seltzer from a high-end Japanese dispenser, and used all my quarters on a gumball machine filled with the world's best snack mix, a buttery mélange of broken Ritz crackers, peanuts, and Crispix, scented with cumin. The mixed drinks are seventeen dollars, which seems both standard these days and also jaw-dropping, especially for Alphabet City's slightly grizzled, sellout-resistant remaining punks, of which Headley is one. (He was the drummer for several hardcore bands.) "YIKES!" the menu notes, next to the price, defensively.

But, compared with other restaurants of this calibre, the food prices feel shockingly low, especially given the obvious quality of the produce, some of it sourced from Campo Rosso, a specialty vegetable farm in Pennsylvania. The burger, made from quinoa, chickpeas, and walnuts, is thirteen dollars. The most expensive dish, at nineteen dollars, is the Yuba-Verde, a spectacular sandwich featuring chewy, slightly stretchy folds of yuba, or soy-milk skin, griddled and layered with chickpeas, broccoli rabe, and mayo on a crusty Italian hero. More menu marginalia: "incl freight the cost per gram of premium yuba is equivalent to that of American Wagyu."

Holdovers from the old menu include the Sloppy Dave (tofu chili, frizzled onions), the burnt-broccoli salad (eggplant purée, candied cashews), and the beets with cream cheese and pretzels, all still wonderful. New additions are few but powerful. In a nod to Odessa's Ukrainian heritage, there's a texturally thrilling stuffed cabbage, filled with sticky rice and oyster and button mushrooms, draped in a sweet-and-sour tomato sauce, and finished with crunchy focaccia bread crumbs. A plate of steamed vegetables, one night, was as deceptively simple as a Rothko—perfectly al-dente spears of asparagus, overwintered carrot, and broccolini to be dipped in a luscious lemon-tahini dressing and a tart, fruity hot sauce.

The market salad, a tower of leaves—Little Gem, arugula, frisée—strewn with shredded carrot, fennel, herbs, bread crumbs, and pickled bird's-beak chilies, was trumped only by a special: apricot panzanella, featuring silky halves of the griddled fruit, focaccia croutons, torn hunks of mozzarella, wedges of cucumber, and Thai basil.

The panzanella was dessert-adjacent, in part because many of the desserts, under the purview of the pastry chefs Darcy Spence and Katie Toles, walk the line between sweet and savory: earthy, herbal coriander-banana gelato; a salty malted date shake. The first time I tried the Pearl Pie, a triangle of passion-fruit custard on a Ritz-cracker base, it was shellacked in passion-fruit glaze and topped with passion-fruit seeds and iridescent tapioca pearls. The second time it was also dusted with crimson-hued *li hing mui*, a preserved-plum powder that's popular in Hawaii, where Toles grew up. It was bright, sour, a little defiant, just right. *(Dishes $9-$19.)*

—*Hannah Goldfield*

PHOTOGRAPH BY LANNA APISUKH FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE




music and peace

sometimes, we remember our true power.
we remember the warmth in the heart,
where any noise or anger around us
can go and can be transformed,
to re-emerge through your voice as
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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT

FLORIDA MACHINE

Presidential campaigns are usually launched in a bright burst of hope. Slick videos are posted, bus tours of the hinterlands are announced, e-mails seeking donations flow into in-boxes like the tide. The candidacy of Governor Ron DeSantis, of Florida, contains some extra, darker emotional layers: defensiveness, a bristling ideological fixity, an undercurrent of dread. In a new poll, DeSantis is down nearly forty points to Donald Trump among Republican primary voters. Yet this month DeSantis set out on the trail—a barbecue joint in Iowa, the Red Arrow Diner in Manchester, New Hampshire—hoping to make a good first impression on voters who do not follow politics obsessively and who may have missed the latest fallout from the arcane war he insists on prosecuting against the Walt Disney Corporation.

Then, on Wednesday evening, DeSantis formally announced his run during an audio-only discussion with Elon Musk, on Twitter Spaces. The event was a glitchy mess; it took twenty minutes to start and rapidly shed viewers. When DeSantis finally got going he dwelled on the niche interests of conservative insiders, at one point digressing about the "accreditation cartels" that govern universities. Somewhere out there, presumably, were voters curious to get a feel for him, but they couldn't even see his face, only a miniature lecturing avatar.

The two candidates most likely to win the Presidency in 2024, Joe Biden and Donald Trump, are, respectively, eighty years old and quickly nearing that age. Both are working from public personae that were largely established by the time DeSantis finished elementary school, and their politics run thick with nostalgia. DeSantis, who is still far ahead of the rest of the G.O.P. field, is forty-four and, if he were to win, would be the second-youngest President ever elected. More significant, his brand developed almost entirely during the Trump era in a stepping-stone manner, built on his laissez-faire approach to the pandemic, his campaign to suppress the teaching of racial and gender themes in schools and to punish teachers who defy him, his backing of permissive gun laws, his aggression toward immigrants and trans people, and his ban on nearly all abortions after six weeks. It isn't always clear how sincerely DeSantis means to impose a puritanical society in Florida (of all places) and how much of his culture war is about political positioning. But name a banner that the Republican Party has gathered under in the past few years and he is likely to have been the one waving it. He is, in that way, a very modern candidate.



As a challenger, DeSantis has some impressive attributes, most tangibly an outside spending group with a two-hundred-million-dollar budget, run by the conservative super-strategist Jeff Roe, which plans to hire enough people to knock on every Iowa voter's door five times. One way to view the G.O.P. primary contest is as a man—Trump—versus DeSantis's machine. And, crucially, DeSantis's project has been popular: he has attained hero status on Fox News and, not coincidentally, he raised record-breaking sums for his reëlection bid last fall, which he won by almost twenty points. Florida is also undergoing a population-driven economic boom, gaining about a thousand new residents each day, who typically move there for the weather and the low taxes, and apparently feel that living in DeSantis's anti-woke citadel is worth the occasional python in the swimming pool.

If the brand is clear, the tactics are still a little fuzzy. Analysts have pointed out that the campaign needs to pursue those sectors of the Republican coalition which are ready to move on from the former President—a group that includes moderates appalled by his attacks on democracy, religious voters who find his personal behavior repugnant, party élites exhausted by his inconstancy and his narcissism. That tactic, though, hinges on a question that hangs over DeSantis during each campaign stop and donor call: how he plans to attack Trump. (The question hanging over his advisers is whether it's

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

even possible to do that in a Republican primary.) DeSantis, who has made virtually no overtures to voters who aren't committed Republicans, has tried to have it both ways. To donors, he has reportedly made the case that Trump is fundamentally unelectable—a plausible assumption, particularly given the number of civil and criminal investigations he still faces. But so far in public DeSantis has declined to make any real criticism of Trump, or even to say clearly that the 2020 election wasn't stolen.

Trump, of course, has not been timid. Having doubled down on a somewhat tortured taunt—Ron DeSanctimonious—he recently discovered a simpler line of attack. DeSantis, he said, has "no personality." Watching the Governor stiffly navigate his way through Iowa and New Hampshire did bring to mind the time an aide suggested that he write "LIKABLE" on a notepad ahead of a debate, as a reminder. But plenty of effective politicians—George H. W. Bush, Al Gore—are awkward on the rope line. It isn't that DeSantis is charmless—or it's not only that. It's that his career has been spent on a charmlessness offensive, trying to persuade voters exhilarated by Trump's willingness to brawl that he is made of the same stuff.

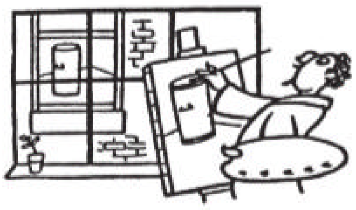
Yet the DeSantis machine represents a larger enterprise than the candidate himself, as Musk's presence, and Roe's, and the vast funding make clear. For several years, conservative operatives and donors who had grown sick of Trump studied the political situation relentlessly, scrutinizing poll cross tabs and focus-group transcripts, quizzing younger friends and acquaintances, searching their own souls. Some may have had second thoughts when Tim Scott, the Black Republican senator from South Carolina—a sincere conservative without the authoritarian baggage—launched his campaign with a happier, if hokier, message. (If Scott's Presidential bid doesn't pan out, he might be a formidable V.P. pick.) But for most of the conservative élites lining up against Trump the consulting contracts have already been drawn up. DeSantis is their man.

Some Republicans have long held that Trump should be taken seriously, but not literally—that while the rage he channelled is real, his threats and proposals shouldn't be accepted at face value. The DeSantis campaign is taking Trump literally. The central proposition of DeSantis's career in Tallahassee and, it appears, of his Presidential candidacy, is that he can actually deliver the social retrenchment that his rival has promised. The issue for DeSantis is whether this prospect will appeal only to conservative insiders, as his Twitter Spaces rollout seemed to do, or whether his maximalist war on progressivism is really what Americans want.

—Benjamin Wallace-Wells

DEPT. OF SANITATION

REDUCE, RETAIN, REMEMBER



Last year, Molly Bloom, a freelance editor, moved into a new apartment, in Flatbush, and quickly befriended a neighbor named Lilly Lam, who mentioned that she designed signs for the Department of Sanitation.

"My dad made an art work for the Department of Sanitation!" Bloom said.

Bloom's father is Rick Meyerowitz, the illustrator and humorist, the creator of the poster art for "Animal House" and more than a hundred features for *National Lampoon*. In 1986, at a time when he was busy producing illustrations for magazines, movies, and ad campaigns, he got a call from an art director at Ogilvy & Mather Direct, which had the Sanitation Department as a client. It needed a logo for its new recycling campaign. The city was asking its residents to sort their trash—voluntarily, to start, so the practice would take some persuading. The signs and posters read "Help Reduce New York's Waste. Reduce, Reuse, Recycle." They presented the categories—plastic, metal, glass, foil—above the image that Meyerowitz had delivered: a lidded metal garbage can, cinched at the waist with a tailor's tape measure.

It had taken him an hour and a half and earned him eleven hundred dollars. "And then suddenly there it was, on every street corner and lamppost in town," Meyerowitz said the other day. "I thought, This is a really large one-man show. Just one piece, sure, but it's everywhere. It's still around."

He'd never got the original back, and he occasionally wondered about it. When Bloom mentioned this to Lam, Lam approached Maggie Lee, the department's archivist, who had it in a cabinet of flat files.

Bloom then texted her father: "um, ricky? i have some good news . . . THEY DIDN'T LOSE IT! they know exactly where it is."

And so, on a recent Friday, Meyerowitz, with Bloom and Lam in tow, visited the department's archives, on Beaver Street, in lower Manhattan, for a long-deferred reunion with his most ubiquitous art work.

" 'Art work' is a bit of a stretch," he said. A year short of eighty, tall and lean, he was wearing jeans, a black cardigan, and a gray fedora. Lee handed him a red portfolio folder, with some jottings ("Job description: Curbside Source for Separation Recycle Program") and a business card (Mary Most, Project Manager, Public Education Unit in the Recycling Programs and Planning Division) on the cover.

Meyerowitz opened the folder and beheld the trash can on a weathered sheet of paper, twelve by ten inches. To a child of that time and place, the image was as elemental as the first pooper-scooper hieroglyph. Meyerowitz said, "It's possible that inside the can, if you can just get the lid off, my grandfather may be in there. A portrait of him."

Meyerowitz grew up in the Bronx. He explained that his grandfather had been a street sweeper, possibly for the department, in its earlier incarnation, more than a century ago: "My father referred to him as a street pilot. He pushed around a barrel on wheels, with a broom and a shovel in it. Whenever he came across some horse shit, he loaded it into the barrel."

Lee, citing a passage in a book she had on hand, said that in those days the city had to contend with 2.5 million pounds of manure a day, and sixty thousand gallons of urine. She showed them copies of an old photograph from her collection, of a street sweeper, like Meyerowitz's grandfather, sweeping up underneath the Williamsburg Bridge.

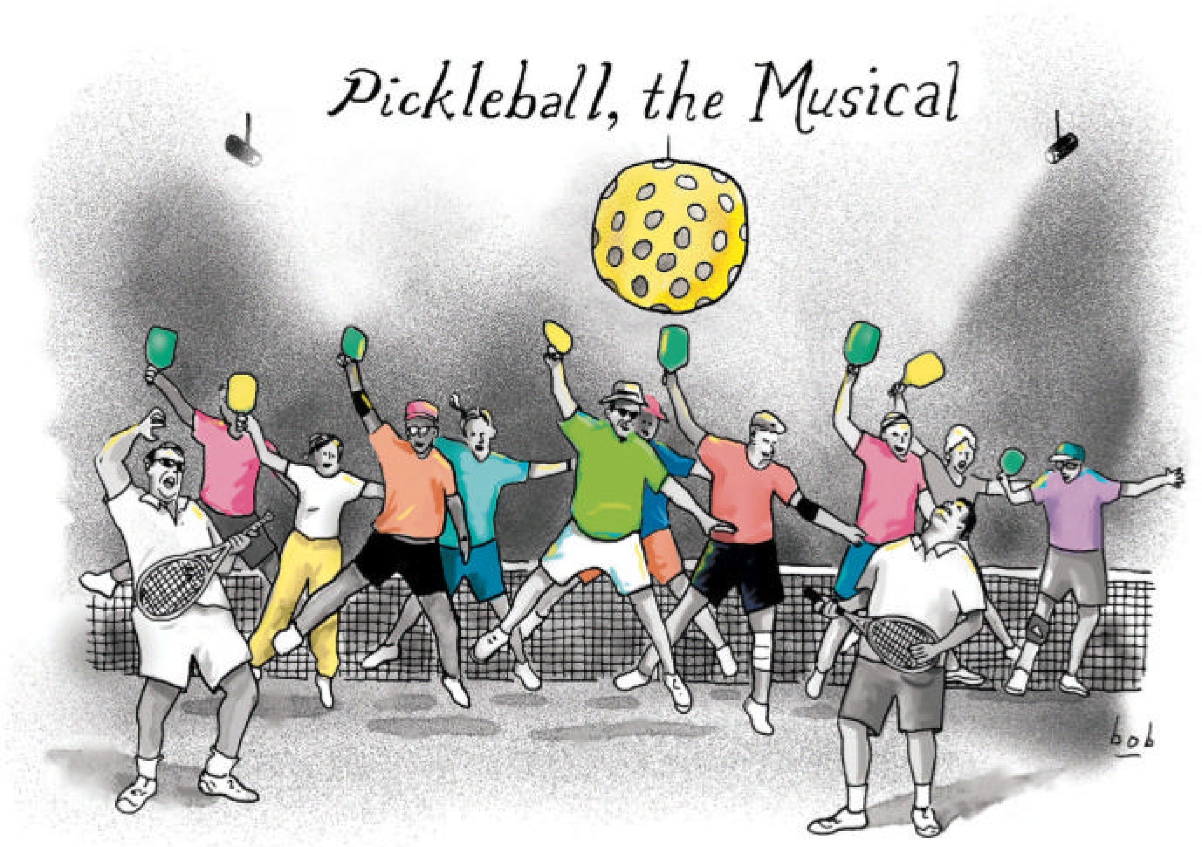
"You can have one if you want," she said.

"I'm going to say no." He was happy, too, to let the department hold on to the trash-can drawing. He explained, "I have three thousand illustrations in my studio. I wish my grandfather was still around with that bin." (Meyerowitz has considered donating some of his work to Boston University, where he studied art. He'd honed his drafting chops in the summers in Provincetown, hawking caricatures of tourists.)

Lee treated her guests to other treasures: a so-called snow book from 1938, tracking how many cubic yards of snow various carters had hauled off the streets; a nineteen-seventies personnel file, in the style of a flip book, with head shots. She had also recently received, from Pennsylvania's Union County Historical Society, the archives of John T. Featherston, the commissioner of street cleaning from 1914 to 1917. Manna from Heaven. Lee, who has a master's from N.Y.U. in archives and public history, has been the sanitation archivist for seven years. "Before that, there was no one doing this particular job," she said. "There hadn't been a lot of thought about what to save and for how long." Reduce, retain, remember.

Meyerowitz was still thinking about manure. "Another thing my father said, about growing up with all that horse shit in the streets: We asked him, 'Wasn't it disgusting?' And he said, 'I dunno. It made it easier to slide into second base.'"

—*Nick Paumgarten*



ART FAIR
MY KID COULD DO THAT



Last weekend, the New Art Dealers Alliance fair filled a building on Twenty-second Street, in Chelsea, with contemporary art, people hoping to sell or buy it, and those simply wanting to see and be seen. Also: some elementary schoolers hawking Country Time lemonade and art works (heavy on the Popsicle sticks and Sculpey) made by fellow-kids, for a cause—specifically, the Children's Museum of the Arts' Emergency Arts Education Fund, which provides assistance to public schools whose budgets have been slashed.

Under a tent on the building's roof, a yellow wooden lemonade stand had been erected and painted with the prices of art works ($25, $50, or $100; buyer's choice), lemonade ($5, $10, or $20), and tote bags ($50). Across from the stand, a café offered cans of San Pellegrino *limonata* for four dollars. The kids were going to have to really work it. Unfortunately, they were running late for their shifts.

Lucas, age nine, wearing a blue T-shirt with Andy Warhol on it, arrived first. He had a sculpture on view at the stand. "I made a little monster," he said, gesturing to a marbled pink clay orb with green eyes. He set about mixing lemonade powder and water.

Seth Cameron, a painter and the executive director of C.M.A. (which gave up its physical space during the pandemic in favor of free, roving programming), said, "I live next to this sneaker shop that does big drops, and there's a huge line that forms, so my two kids figured out that they could sell lemonade whenever a line showed up. I had to get them to stop, because they would stand outside for twenty minutes and come back with, like, two hundred dollars."

A seven-year-old girl in a floral dress, named Emmanuelle, who was visiting the fair with her parents, joined Lucas behind the counter. The two drew with markers on paper cups that read "I ___ NY."

"I'm drawing an art work that I've seen before," Emmanuelle explained, filling in the blank with a depiction of Robert Indiana's stacked "LOVE" sculpture. Lucas drew a sneaker.

Camila (eight, in a flowy shirt) arrived with her mom, Ana Leshen, who is on C.M.A.'s board; her sister, Alina (ten, in a stretchy black-and-white jumper); and Alina's friend Max (nine; Chelsea Piers T-shirt, cleats). "He's not an artist, he's a soccer player," Camila said of Max.

"Yes, I am a soccer player," Max affirmed.

"And she's not an artist, she's a dancer," Camila said of Alina. "My work was in the Metropolitan Museum. It was a sculpture, a robot." How'd she get into art? "Well, it first started in art class," she mused. When her teacher alerted her that her work would be displayed in the Met (through a program called P.S. Art), "I still didn't know what that was, because I was, like, seven." Her mom filled her in. "And then the day arrived and I saw my tiny art piece in the Metropolitan," Camila recalled, dreamily. Lucas and Max were getting experimental with the powder-to-water ratio of their lemonade.

"I like lemonade, but I like ones with real lemons," Emmanuelle professed.

The gang grabbed some cups and started circulating.

"Oh, my gosh! Did you decorate all of these?" a woman carrying a tote bag that read "I CAN FEEL THE MONEY

LEAVING MY BODY” asked Lucas.

“No,” Lucas said, flatly. He ran back inside with her cash.

Max stood over a pink piggy bank, chanting, “I am the money man!”

RJ Supa, a mustachioed artist with bleached-blond hair, approached, with a small dog in tow. “How much is this?” he asked, indicating a painting of a dog.

“You choose,” Camila answered. “But twenty-five is best.”

“Hmm, what about fifty?” Supa suggested. “It’s because we’ve got a dog. And I got a cat drawing downstairs because we have a cat. The dog is named French Fry. The cat is Banana.”

“My uncle has a cat and I have a dog, Frida,” Camila said.

“Like Kahlo?” Supa asked. He requested more info on the artist behind his new acquisition.

“It was random art kids that made them,” Alina said. “But they took a *lot* of work to do.”

“My art was in the Metropolitan,” Camila said.

Max took a break from shoving bills into the piggy bank to peruse the booth. “This is my favorite,” he said of a blue clay ball on a white base. “I also like this. They’re like little cakes. Cake is my favorite. I can’t use my money, though, because my credit card’s at home.”

Alex Morris, a gallerist in a green dress, swooped in and bought two sculptures, a tote bag, and a lemonade.

“You want the ten-dollar lemonade?” Max said.

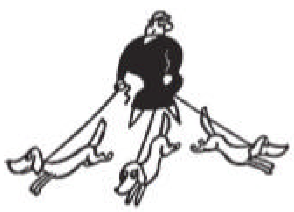
“Is it better than the five-dollar lemonade?” Morris asked.

“It’s the best,” Max said. The money man was catching on.

“I want the best of everything in life,” Morris said. “Let’s do it.”

—*Emma Allen*

DOG’S LIFE DEPT.
THE RESCUE CIRCUIT



One spring evening, Georgina Bloomberg arrived at the Pierre Hotel, where she was being honored by the animal-welfare group NYC Second Chance Rescue. She’d brought Justin Waterman, her fiancé, but had left her three rescue dogs at home.

“Is he yours?” a photographer asked, nodding toward Waterman, a financial adviser.

“Yes, he’s mine,” said Bloomberg, a prize-winning equestrian who splits her time between Manhattan, Westchester, and Florida. She has been interested in the well-being of animals since she was a little girl. Now forty, she’s been on plenty of gnarly rescue missions (sometimes with Amanda Hearst, a fellow New York heiress), raiding puppy mills and airlifting strays from the Caribbean on the family jet. (Her father is Michael Bloomberg.)

Nearby, several dogs up for adoption waited in promlike attire (a pit bull named Lonnie, with a missing ear, wore a pink tutu) and tussled beneath chandeliers. Someone handed Bloomberg a squirming, lick-happy pup in a blue bow tie, for a photo; for a moment, it looked like her silky black dress might get shredded. She put her nose to the nape of the dog’s neck and inhaled for a long time, as if from a bong.

“There’s nothing like the smell of a puppy’s head,” she said.

Bloomberg estimates that she is involved with “a couple of dozen” animal-rescue outfits. There are now close to a hundred and fifty such groups in the city, according to Best Friends Animal Society, an advocacy organization. It puts the number of local dogs and cats that are saved from euthanasia every year at around seventy thousand—almost the same count as the city’s homeless population.

Bloomberg has become a kind of empress ambassador of the rescue world, which blew up after so many videos circulated of pets that were abandoned during Hurricane Katrina. (Animal-lovers, like purveyors of portable toilets, have a thing for cute names. Some of the newer rescue organizations are Rescuzilla, Posh Pets, and Stray from the Heart.) Low-key and no-nonsense, like her father, Bloomberg knows the inside details—for instance, that black dogs are harder to place for adoption, and that pit bulls are not among the most aggressive breeds. She also tells her son that the only thing he is allowed to brag about is having rescue pets. Besides dogs and horses, these



Georgina Bloomberg

have included a pig, a mule, a chicken, and a goat.

After dinner and her speech, in which she said that she was honored to be honored, she stopped at the coat check. “I want to be known for going on rescue trips more than going to parties,” she said. She was dashing home to catch a Rangers game. “But, if I have to put on a dress and show up for things like this, I’m willing to do it.”

A few days later, Bloomberg walked into Versa, an airy lounge at a midtown hotel, where she was co-hosting a cocktail party benefitting Rescue Dogs Rock NYC. There were no dogs to kiss, but Lara Trump, the event’s other co-host, wanted to embrace. She had flown up from Florida, where she’d recently helped organize a fashion-show fund-raiser at Mar-a-Lago for Big Dog Ranch Rescue; her father-in-law, the former President, told guests at the event that she was terrific but that the country was in trouble. (Big Dog Ranch Rescue got into some trouble itself when I.R.S. filings revealed that the organization has provided Trump properties with nearly two million dollars in fund-raising-related revenue.)

Trump approached Bloomberg and said, “Hi, honey,” her hair and teeth gleaming. She wore a taut dress with embedded sparkles and a plunging back. “It’s New York, so we’re all in black.”

All business, in a Zara blazer, Bloomberg greeted the founders of Rescue Dogs

Rock, and Trump followed suit. The organization had rehabilitated a beagle named Ben that Trump fostered, and then adopted, with her big-game-hunting husband, Eric. She posts a lot of dog content (she calls herself a "foster failure," because she kept Ben) on Instagram, along with attacks on the January 6th Committee and rants about election interference, Letitia James, trans athletes, and Hunter Biden.

During a press briefing and photo op, a *Daily Mail* reporter had some questions for Bloomberg. Was she friends with Ivanka Trump? (Yes.) Was it true that Anna Wintour had her own bathroom at the Met Ball? (Uncertain.) Would she dump a boyfriend if he didn't love dogs? (Yes.) Would she accept a donation from Archewell, the charity of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex?

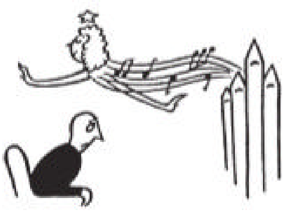
"My mother would never forgive me," Bloomberg replied, referring to Susan Brown, who is English.

She looked in need of rescue herself by then, and began to back away from her inquisitors. "I promised I would be home in time for dinner," she said. As Trump started in on her rescue-dog stump speech ("Right now, it's a dire situation for animals around this country"), Bloomberg was gone.

—*Bob Morris*

SURVIVAL DEPT.

THE SONG



"I drew this house when I was about forty," the singer Gloria Gaynor said the other day. "This was my dream house." She was giving a tour of her new place in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. She gestured toward a marble foyer and a glittering chandelier, and mentioned her "party basement," which has a bar and a screening room. "When I drew it, it was for a couple. Because I expected to be married forever," she went on. "I'm all about family and whatever marriage is supposed to be—which I didn't have. But I can tell people how *not* to have one." She gave a throaty laugh.

Gaynor, who is about to turn eighty, was recovering from shoulder surgery, and had on slippers, a cozy turquoise loungewear set, and diamond bracelets. A bio-pic about her life, called "Gloria Gaynor: I Will Survive," after her Grammy-winning 1978 megahit, is premièring at the Tribeca Film Festival this month.

She enjoys telling her story, which begins in Newark, where she was raised by a single mother who inspired her to sing. Clive Davis signed her and pointed her toward disco. In 1978, while performing at the Beacon Theatre, Gaynor fell backward over a monitor; the accident left her paralyzed from the waist down. Six months later, while still in recovery, she married Linwood Simon, who proved to be a subpar manager and an even worse husband. (He wouldn't let her into their apartment when she got locked out.) He kept her career focussed on Europe, rather than trying to build on her success in the U.S., which led her to drift into near-irrelevance.

She divorced Simon in 2005, and in 2019, after years of fantasizing, she released a gospel album, "Testimony," which won a Grammy and kicked off a comeback. "I love cooking and having people for dinner," she said, entering her shiny, bright kitchen. "I love that I have two trash cans." A sign over the sink read "Don't make me come down there.—God." As Gaynor plopped down in a seat at the kitchen island, she explained that she invents her own recipes, including a dish called Chicken à la Gaynor, inspired by a meal she threw together one night in 1985, when Simon surprised her by bringing home some business associates for dinner. Ingredients: chicken parts, cream-of-mushroom soup, cream-of-chicken soup, sour cream, heavy cream, and Better Than Bouillon. "Serve that with saffron rice and colorful vegetables and dinner rolls," she said. "And voilà."

The counter was full of get-well cards and flower arrangements, including one from her personal trainer. (She does CrossFit three times a week and can hold a plank for two minutes.) In 1978, while hospitalized following spinal surgery, she got a call. Her record company, Polydor, said it was dropping her. After getting discharged, still unable to work, she lost her apartment and was basically broke. Then she got another call, about what she calls "the song." The executives at Polydor had changed their minds. Could she come to L.A. to record a new song called "Substitute"? She hated the song, but she went for it, and did the recording while wearing a back brace. When she read the lyrics of the song the producers had in mind for the B-side, she said, "Are you stupid? You're going to bury this on the B-side?" It was "I Will Survive." She told them, "This is a hit song."

Polydor gave the recording to the d.j. at Studio 54. "The audience jammed the dance floor immediately," Gaynor said. "I thought, A jaded New York audience falling for a song the first time they hear it?" Polydor flipped the songs and made "I Will Survive" the A-side.

The song has become an anthem for female empowerment, gay rights, survivors of domestic abuse, and oppressed people everywhere. Gaynor is expected to sing it constantly. After a performance in Italy, a young woman approached her. "She told me, 'I've been having a lot of pain and anguish, and where I'm living I don't have a lot of privacy, so I was going to go home so I could commit suicide,'" Gaynor recalled. Going to the show changed her mind. "I'll never forget it. We were both crying and hugging."



Gloria Gaynor

She went on, "Everybody wants to know they're useful. I don't know anybody who's been more blessed in that area than I have. That song has added so much meaning and purpose to my life. So, do I get tired of singing it? Never!"

—*Sheelah Kolhatkar*

ANNALS OF MUSIC

THE TRIALS OF ED SHEERAN

Who owns a groove?

BY JOHN SEABROOK



Ed Sheeran denies illegally copying Ed Townsend and Marvin Gaye's song.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MARK HARRIS

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

One day in 1973, Edward Townsend, a singer-songwriter who'd had a minor hit with the 1958 ballad "For Your Love," invited a friend, the R. & B. superstar Marvin Gaye, to his home in Los Angeles, to hear some new tunes. Sitting at the piano, Townsend played a four-chord progression in the key of E-flat major while singing a melody that harked back to his doo-wop days. Townsend, then forty-three, had recently been released from rehab, and the song was a plea to a higher power to help him stay sober. "I've been really tryin' baby, tryin' to hold back this feeling for so long" was one of the lines.

Gaye, who was suffering from writer's block after the huge success of "What's Going On," for Motown Records, in 1971, heard his friend's song as a hymn to sex. Together, they created "Let's Get It On."

Motown's music-publishing company, Jobete, took fifty per cent of the song's copyright. Gaye and Townsend agreed to split their share of the composition's future earnings. Gaye recorded the song in L.A., in March, 1973, with members of the Funk Brothers, Motown's house band, who added the wah-wah guitar introduction and the song's undeniable groove, in which the second and fourth chords are anticipated—slightly in front of the beat. Gaye, in addition to his soaring vocal, played keyboard on the record. The song, Gaye's first No. 1, was one of the biggest hits of the year. It became a foundational track in the quiet storm of seventies R. & B. and soul, and has remained an evergreen—a steady earner.

"Let's Get It On" launched a new phase in Gaye's career; four years later, his song "Got to Give It Up" also reached No. 1. Before his death, a filicide by Marvin Gaye, Sr., in 1984, Gaye had a final smash with "Sexual Healing."

Townsend's career peaked with "Let's Get It On." He fell back into alcohol abuse, acquired a cocaine habit, and ended up living on the streets of Los Angeles. He eventually beat his addictions, and, near the end of his life, devoted himself to helping others on the street. He died in 2003, at the age of seventy-four.

In February, 2014, an English singer-songwriter named Amy Wadge visited the pop star Ed Sheeran at his home in Suffolk. Wadge was an old friend and a frequent collaborator. Sheeran's paternal grandfather had recently died, and his maternal grandmother was in a wheelchair, following cancer surgery. Sheeran and Wadge had a long talk that evening about enduring love.

Sheeran excused himself to shower before dinner with his parents, who live nearby, and Wadge picked up one of his acoustic guitars (a gift from Harry Styles) and began strumming a four-chord progression in D major. Sheeran heard it when he came out of the shower, and called out, "We need to do something with that!"

After dinner, Wadge and Sheeran returned home and continued writing in Sheeran's kitchen. The first line, "When your legs don't work like they used to," referred to his grandmother's condition. By midnight, "Thinking Out Loud" was finished. Sheeran recorded the song, in which the second and fourth chords are anticipated, just in time to include it on his second album, "Multiply."

As a writer, Sheeran is known for his speed and facility. He can toss off four or five songs a day when he's recording an album. His EP "No. 5 Collaborations Project" led to a deal with Atlantic Records, a Warner Music label, when he was nineteen. He writes ballads as well as bangers; he also raps. He has collaborated with artists including Taylor Swift, Rita Ora, and Justin Bieber. His

songs are popular partly because they are so accessible. It's as if you already know them.

Sheeran usually performs solo with a guitar—without costume changes, dancers, or pyrotechnics—backed only by looped tracks that he makes with a pedal as he plays. The two-year-long tour for his 2019 album, "Divide," took in more than seven hundred and seventy-five million dollars, making it the second-highest-grossing tour of all time. Now, at thirty-two, he is one of the wealthiest people in the U.K.

"Thinking Out Loud," released in September, 2014, was one of the first songs to be streamed half a billion times on Spotify; it has since passed 2.2 billion streams. It won the 2015 Grammy for Song of the Year, and its success shot Sheeran into the thin air of the world's top hitmakers. The song also became a favorite at his concerts.

In a YouTube video of a Sheeran show in Zurich in November, 2014, the artist, playing an electric guitar, smoothly transitions from "Thinking Out Loud" to "Let's Get It On" and back to "Thinking," without changing chords or the harmonic rhythm—the syncopated cadence at which chords are played. He smiles a bit mischievously. The crowd loves it.

Most pop songs are made out of other pop songs. Many are constructed on three- or four-chord progressions, and have a near-identical blueprint—intro, verse, chorus, bridge, outro. Other than words and melody, not much in a composition is protected by copyright. As the Australian comedy trio Axis of Awesome demonstrates in a video that went viral, any number of pop songs can fit inside the same four chords. For this reason, the property lines of popular music are hard to draw. Inspiration, imitation, homage, and pastiche are all at play. Often, the trick is to sound new and old at the same time. But at what point do influence and interpolation become appropriation and plagiarism?

In 2019, the hitmaker Pharrell Williams spoke with the producer Rick Rubin, for a filmed conversation about creativity. Williams described his reaction to hearing a song that makes him feel something he hasn't felt before: "I'm going to have to reverse engineer the feeling in order to get to the chord structure." He did just that with "Blurred Lines," his 2013 hit with Robin Thicke, for which he seemed to metabolize almost every aspect of Marvin Gaye's 1977 hit "Got to Give It Up," including the crowd noises and the cowbell.

But, according to a jury in Los Angeles, Williams went too far. In 2015, it found that the composers of "Blurred Lines" had illegally copied Gaye's song. The songwriters were ultimately forced to pay the Gaye family $5.3 million, and to share half the song's future publishing royalties. The verdict was a victory for the copyright attorney Richard Busch. Afterward, more than two hundred producers and other people in the music business signed an amicus brief predicting that, if the verdict was upheld, they would be forced to work "always with one foot in the recording studio and one foot in the courtroom." It was upheld anyway, in a 2–1 vote, in 2018. The dissenting judge on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, Jacqueline Nguyen, described the ruling as "a devastating blow to future musicians and composers everywhere," because it allowed "the Gayes to accomplish what no one has before: copyright a musical style."

Many people correctly predicted that the "Blurred Lines" ruling would trigger a wave of frivolous infringement cases. "I can't tell you how many calls we get after the Grammys," Judith Finell, who was the Gaye family's expert musicologist in the "Blurred Lines" case, told me. "Mostly from lawyers wanting to see if their client's claim of infringement is winnable."

Taylor Swift, the Weeknd, and Justin Bieber are only a few of the artists who have been subject to recent allegations of infringement. The composers of Dua Lipa's 2020 hit "Levitating" are being sued on both coasts: In Los Angeles, the reggae band Artikal Sound System is claiming that the song copied its 2017 track "Live Your Life." In the Southern District of New York, L. Russell Brown and Sandy Linzer believe that "Levitating" infringes on two songs they wrote, "Wiggle and Giggle All Night," from 1979, and "Don Diablo," from the following year.

Two influential decisions in California's Ninth Circuit in the past few years have repaired some of the "Blurred Lines" damage. In 2020, the appeals court confirmed a jury's verdict that Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven" did not infringe on "Taurus," by the late-sixties rock band Spirit, because the descending A-minor figure in "Taurus" consisted of "common musical elements" that can't be copyrighted. In 2020, a district judge in Los Angeles overturned a verdict that found Katy Perry's "Dark Horse" had infringed on eight notes from "Joyful Noise," an obscure song by the Christian artist Flame. The judge's decision was upheld on appeal.

This spring, a high-stakes copyright trial took place in New York City. The issue in Griffin v. Sheeran was whether Sheeran and Wadge had illegally copied from "Let's Get It On" in creating "Thinking Out Loud." The larger issues were how much songwriters like Sheeran should be allowed to borrow from earlier works, and the opaque and antiquated process by which the law determines what part of a pop song the composer actually owns.

Music copyright, which became law in the United States in 1831, allows composers to establish the "metes and bounds" of their intellectual property, just as mechanical inventors do in obtaining patents. But a patent is granted only after examiners have determined, by way of an investigation, that an invention is truly new and useful. A music copyright is more like a virtual rubber stamp that a musician gets automatically as soon as a song is "fixed in a tangible medium of expression." If the song is a hit and the musician is sued—because "where there's a hit, there's a writ," as an old adage goes—it is up to the courts to figure out how original the work is.

Copyright makes it commercially viable to be an artist. But painters can't claim ownership of a color, and songwriters can't monopolize notes or, for that matter, common chord progressions, modes, or rhythms. A composer is entitled to own only a particular expression or arrangement of a musical idea, not the idea itself. (The concept of an arpeggio, or of counterpoint, cannot be copyrighted.) The question is how to legally separate the two. The law, which represents the Apollonian side of human experience—the rational, analytical, and intellectual—is a leaky sieve for containing the Dionysian elements of music: the irrational, abstract, and emotional parts.

"Songwriters almost never steal melodies from one another on purpose," Joe

Bennett, a professor of forensic musicology at Berklee College of Music, told me. "In almost every case, the copying is inadvertent." Still, outright theft does happen—compare Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues," from 1955, to Gordon Jenkins's 1953 song "Crescent City Blues." Cash ultimately paid Jenkins seventy-five thousand dollars (which now amounts to some six hundred and sixty thousand) for lifting his melody and some of his lyrics.

Bennett explained that songwriters can be found liable for infringement of copyright even if the infringement was "subconsciously accomplished." The phrase comes from the judge in a 1976 case, which found that George Harrison had unknowingly but unlawfully copied the Chiffons' 1963 song "He's So Fine" in his 1970 hit "My Sweet Lord." The two melodies are virtually identical.

"Also known as 'cryptomnesia,'" Bennett added. He defined the term as "a forgotten memory that is mistaken for an original idea." Pop music is bursting with cryptomnesiacs.

Before the Internet, lack of access was the standard defense against a claim of subconscious copying: the composer couldn't possibly have heard the accuser's obscure song. At music publishers' offices, assistants were instructed to return unsolicited recordings unopened, so that the sender couldn't argue later that his work had been filched. But platforms like SoundCloud, Spotify, and TikTok have severely curtailed that defense. Finell, the musicologist, told me, "Some kid will come to me and say, 'I just heard the latest Beyoncé song, and she stole my drum track!' I say, 'How did Beyoncé get to hear a drum track that you composed in your garage?' 'Well, I put it out on social media, and I have a hundred thousand followers. One of them could work with Jay-Z!'"

Can a style or a vibe ever be infringed on, if not all that much in pop is really new? True, some homages to past styles are more brazen than others: Bruno Mars and Mark Ronson took eighties funk grooves from the Gap Band's "Oops Upside Your Head" and made them part of the Grammy-winning song "Uptown Funk" without asking for permission. After the "Blurred Lines" verdict, a number of songwriters were added to the song's credits.

The music industry was recently shaken by "Heart on My Sleeve," a song featuring a duet between a fake Drake and a fake the Weeknd, in which both vocals were created, using generative A.I., by an anonymous user called Ghostface. Artists and rights holders are concerned that their creations will be used to train A.I. generators that will eventually replace them. Faced with that possibility, rights holders are likely to seek more protection for style, even though doing so could make it harder for artists to do their work without infringing.



Ed Townsend had two sons, Clef Michael and David, born to his wife, Cherrigale, and a daughter, also named Cherrigale, born in Los Angeles in 1960 to a singer, who gave the child up for adoption at birth. The adoptive family, the Griffins, changed the baby's name to Kathryn. When Kathryn was a child, her adoptive mother would point at a hysterectomy scar on her stomach and say, "This is where you came from."

Kathryn showed an aptitude for music, which made her parents nervous. "My whole life, I wanted to play piano, flute, piccolo," she told me. The family moved from L.A. to Hattiesburg, Mississippi: "They didn't want me in the music industry, because they were afraid I'd find out who my father was and fall into the life he did."

Griffin fell anyway. She became addicted to crack cocaine and got into sex work to support her habit. She was trafficked, she told me, and after escaping her abusers she lived for a time in a "cardboard condominium" under a bridge. She speaks in a hoarse Southern drawl; in spite of her past, she laughs a lot.

In 1986, when Griffin was twenty-six, her grandfather, a Christian minister, told her that she was adopted. Her mother then confessed that her biological father was a famous musician. Griffin called an acquaintance, Hubert Laws, the jazz musician. "Have you ever heard of a man named Ed Townsend?" she asked. Laws replied, "Everybody knows who Ed Townsend is!" Griffin said, "Well, I don't!"

She recalled reaching Townsend by phone for the first time: "I said, 'This is your daughter.' He said, 'I have looked for you your entire life.'" But he had been searching for a Cherrigale, not a Kathryn.

Townsend left Griffin a third of his "Let's Get It On" royalties. (In the nineteen-eighties, he had sold part of his share of the song's publishing copyright to Jobete.) She promised to protect his legacy. Griffin got sober in 2003, the year Townsend died. She began counselling women in prison in Houston who had been sex workers; she is now an expert in human-trafficking victims' rights. Griffin estimates that she has rescued more than a thousand women from "the life." When her half brother David died, in 2005, he left Griffin his share of his father's royalties, as did her aunt Helen McDonald, in 2020.

Early in 2015, friends of Griffin alerted her to the similarities between "Let's Get It On" and a new song called "Thinking Out Loud." "They said, 'This British guy, he just changed the words and kept all the music!'" she told me. Griffin listened to both: "And I went, 'Oh, my God. Wow.'"

Griffin tried to notify Sony/ATV Music Publishing, the behemoth that had recently acquired the Jobete catalogue. But no one at Sony returned her calls. "Let's Get It On" was in the American Songbook. Shouldn't Sony want to protect its I.P. from infringement? Then Griffin figured it out: Sony was probably conflicted because it was also the publisher of "Thinking Out Loud," along with much of the rest of Sheeran's catalogue.

Sony eventually asked two musicologists to investigate the claim. Both advised the company that there was no infringement, as did a third musicologist, whom Sheeran had hired in the U.K. Still, it seemed to Griffin that no one at Sony was looking after her interests or her father's legacy. (Sony says that it often finds itself on both sides of infringement suits, and that it remains neutral in these cases.)

Griffin found lawyers, Pat Frank and Keisha Rice, in Tallahassee, Florida. They contacted Alexander Stewart, a professor of music at the University of Vermont. Stewart heard enough similari-

ties between the two songs to write a report saying that Sheeran and Wadge were infringing on Gaye and Townsend. In 2017, Griffin's attorneys filed a civil suit in New York, where Sony is headquartered, which charged that "the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic compositions of 'Thinking' are substantially and /or strikingly similar" to "Let's Get It On." As with "Blurred Lines," the claim focussed not on obvious similarities in the songs' melodies or lyrics but on compositional elements associated with the rhythmic harmony—the groove.

On a Monday a few weeks ago, shortly after 11 A.M., Judge Louis L. Stanton, who is ninety-five years old, took his place at the bench in a federal courtroom in downtown Manhattan. The plaintiff, now Kathryn Griffin Townsend, was seated next to her attorneys. She wore a dark-green dress, a long black coat, and an expression of sombre resolve. Her daughter Skye was also in attendance.

In music-copyright trials, similarities are assessed by two kinds of people: expert listeners and lay ones. The élite ears belong to forensic musicologists, who are often academics with advanced degrees. They hear music intellectually, in quantifiable component parts: tempo, amplitude, arrangement. The musicologists offer supposedly objective analyses of the "musical fingerprints" of songs, but they manage to arrive at opposite conclusions, depending on which side is employing them—generally for around five hundred dollars an hour. The lay listeners on the jury, who are a kind of proxy for pop music's audience, temper the experts' testimony with what their own ears tell them.

In federal court, this methodology is known as the Arnstein test. It derives from Arnstein v. Porter—a famous 1946 case that was heard during New York's heyday as a songwriting town—involving Cole Porter, the Broadway composer, and Ira B. Arnstein, a writer of Yiddish folk songs and light opera, who became convinced that many of the biggest hits of the era had been stolen from him. The songwriter accused Porter of copying the melodies in "Night and Day" and "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," among other songs, from sheet music kept in a trunk in his shabby Upper West Side apartment, possibly aided by a duplicitous landlord. Arnstein ultimately lost the case, as he lost every case in his long career as a copyright troll. However, as Gary Rosen notes in his book "Unfair to Genius," from 2012, "It is within American jurisprudence and not popular music that the name Ira B. Arnstein reverberates." He adds, "If only he could have collected a royalty on the case law that bears his name."

Fourteen prospective lay listeners were called into the Griffin v. Sheeran jury box, and Judge Stanton asked whether anything prevented them from rendering impartial judgment.

" 'Perfect' was my wedding song," a young woman said.

"My teen-age daughters love Ed Sheeran," another said. "I don't know his music."

Both women were eventually rejected during voir dire, as was a young man who said that he was pursuing a doctorate in musicology at Columbia University. Even though he was probably the best-qualified potential juror to decide the case, he clearly wasn't a lay listener. The final seven-person jury included a lawyer, a special-ed teacher, a dramaturge, an amateur singer, a recent college graduate, and a guy who'd played trumpet in middle school.

Because "Let's Get It On," or "L.G.O.," as the legal documents refer to the song, was recorded before 1978, it is governed by the 1909 Copyright Act, which stipulated that, in order for a musical work to be registered for copyright, a written composition must be submitted to the U.S. Copyright Office, in Washington, as the "deposit copy." (It wasn't until the 1976 Copyright Act, which went into effect on January 1, 1978, that sound recordings were admissible as deposit copies.)

In both the "Blurred Lines" and "Stairway to Heaven" cases, the jury was not permitted to listen to any pre-1978 recording. The jurors in Griffin v. Sheeran could listen to the recording of Sheeran's song, but they had to rely on the five pages of sheet music for "Let's Get It On," a skeletal transcription that contained lyrics, melody, chords, and a notation of where the syncopated beats fall. Gaye's piano and the Funk Brothers' additions to the groove, such as the bass line, weren't on the deposit copy. Gaye, who didn't read music, probably never even saw the transcription. (Sheeran can't read music, either, a fact that he readily admitted on the stand.) The only versions of "L.G.O." that the jury could listen to were the experts' MIDI audio files, which were made from the sheet music using musical software, and sung by a computer-generated voice. The tinny, wheedling sound of the synthesized music and the high-pitched android vocal made a classic soul song sound utterly soulless.

Almost all the major African American contributions to American music—



"Sir, did you order the special meal?"

ragtime, jazz, swing, hip-hop—were built on rhythmic innovations that weren't transcribed in sheet music and copyrighted. (The bent third and seventh blue notes that lie at the heart of the blues can't even be written in twelve-note chromatic-scale notation.) Ingrid Monson, the Quincy Jones Professor of African American Music at Harvard, who also served as an expert witness for the Gaye family in the "Blurred Lines" trial, told me, "There could be no copyright system less suited to rewarding the creativity of African American music than the one we have. It was obviously modelled on classical music, and on the idea that a real piece of music, one that was worthy of copyright, would be written in notation."

Even though the Copyright Office now allows recordings to be submitted in place of transcriptions, melody and lyrics remain the most important elements of a musical copyright involving a song's composition, partly because they can be seen by judges and juries on paper. The focus on protecting the topline seems out of step with the dominance in contemporary pop of the track—the harmonic and rhythmic bed for a song, usually made by a producer on a digital workstation—which frequently precedes melodies and lyrics. It's often the track that makes a song sound unique.

Kathryn Griffin Townsend isn't the first person to accuse Ed Sheeran of copying a song. In 2017, on the advice of counsel, Sheeran settled an infringement claim brought by the writers of "Amazing," a song performed by Matt Cardle, an "X Factor" winner, who maintained Sheeran's 2014 hit "Photograph" infringed on their track. Infringement claims are often resolved this way. In 2015, Sam Smith settled amicably with Tom Petty over the similarity between the chorus hook in Smith's song "Stay with Me" and that in Petty's "I Won't Back Down." In 2021, Olivia Rodrigo offered the band Paramore a writing credit and a share of the profits from her song "Good 4 You," whose hook sounds a lot like the pre-chorus of Paramore's "Misery Business."

But Sheeran came to feel that settling (reportedly for five million dollars) made him a target for copyright trolls. "Shape of You," a 2017 Sheeran megahit, was the subject of multiple disputes. He amicably resolved one, with the songwriters of TLC's hit "No Scrubs," for borrowing its melody. (While writing the song, he'd referred to it as "the TLC song.") He initiated and won another case, brought in the U.K., against Sami Chokri, a British songwriter and grime artist, who'd asserted that Sheeran's "Shape of You" had stolen the chorus from his 2015 song "Oh Why." The magistrate who decided the case in Sheeran's favor ordered Chokri to pay more than nine hundred thousand pounds, to cover Sheeran's legal fees.

In a BBC Two "Newsnight" interview that aired in the U.K. after the victory, Sheeran and his co-writer John McDaid, of Snow Patrol, talked about the "extraordinary strain" of the lawsuit on their creativity and mental health. "The best feeling in the world is the euphoria around the first idea of writing a great song," Sheeran said, perhaps recalling that night in the kitchen with Wadge. "The first spark, where you go, 'This is special—we can't spoil this.'" He went on, "But that feeling has now turned into 'Oh, wait, let's stand back for a minute, have we touched anything?' You find yourself in the moment second-guessing yourself." As a precaution, Sheeran added, he films all his songwriting sessions, should a claim later arise.

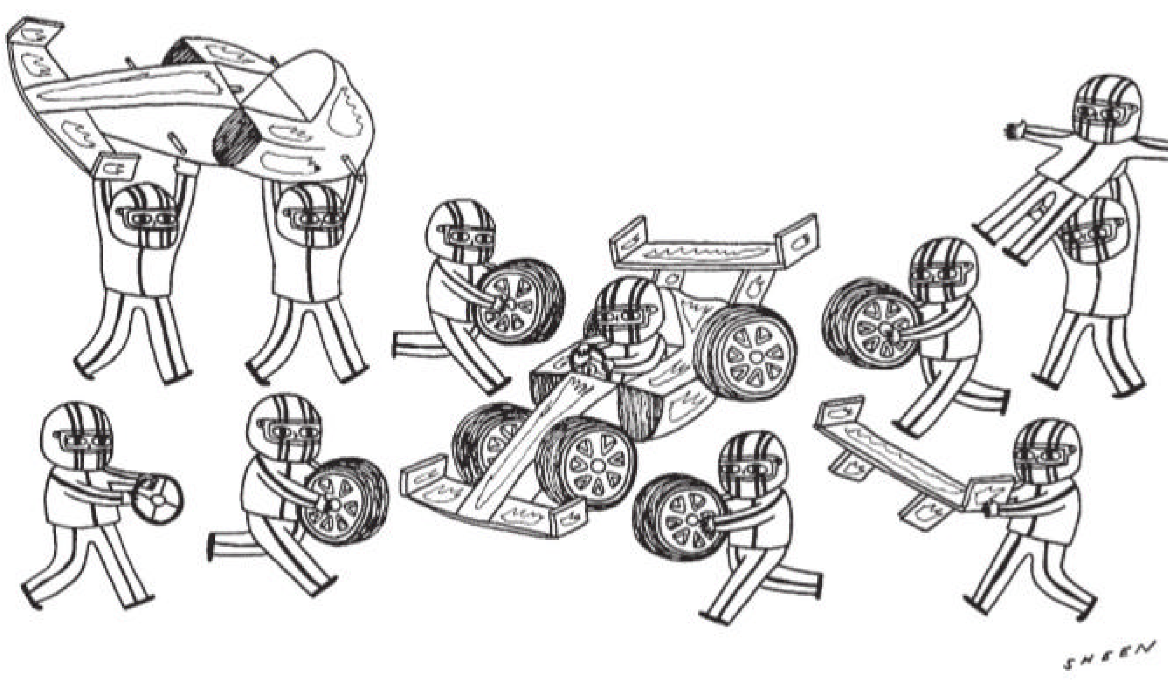
"This is not about money," Sheeran said. "It's about heart, honesty, and integrity. Win or lose, we had to go to court—we had to stand up for what we thought was right."

Sheeran decided to go to court rather than settle with Griffin for the same reason. He testified that his songwriter and artist friends were urging him to fight, saying, " 'You have to win this for us.' " These days, Sheeran observed, "it's just something that happens. When you write songs and they're successful, someone comes after you." He also said that, if he lost this case, he was going to quit music. "I'm finished," he declared. "I'm done."

Sheeran arrived in court the day after jury selection. He wore a dark-navy suit with double vents in the back, and a blue necktie with small white polka dots, but he still managed to look scruffy, like a subway busker turned banker. He sat at the defense table, where, in the course of seven days, the spectators behind him—a mix of copyright attorneys, music journalists, and superfans—could study his distinctive copper-colored coif.

Townsend sat just in front of Sheeran, at the plaintiff's table. Her coat, a gift from the musician George Clinton, had the word "INTEGRITY" emblazoned on the back, directly in Sheeran's line of sight. Townsend's legal team included the civil-rights lawyer Ben Crump, a personal friend, who represented George Floyd's family after Floyd's murder, and worked with Keisha Rice on the Trayvon Martin wrongful-death case. This would be his first music-copyright trial.

A few weeks earlier, Crump had held a press conference outside the courthouse. With Townsend standing next to him, he'd said, "It is important that we understand that this is part of a larger issue. Far too many times in history, Black artists have created some of the most miraculous music in the world, only to see white artists come and usurp that music and reap untold fortunes while these Black artists and their families derive nothing from their genius."



But surely the Yorkshire-born Sheeran wasn't solely responsible for the shameful exploitation of Black artists within the U.S. music industry? As Jennifer Jenkins, a copyright-law professor at Duke, put it to me, "Sheeran isn't Pat Boone covering songs by Little Richard, and he isn't Alan Freed taking credit for Chuck Berry's 'Maybellene' without writing a single note." Nevertheless, Crump called on Sheeran to "do the right thing" and settle with Griffin before the trial started. Otherwise, Crump thundered, "let's get it on!"

In his opening statement, Crump called for "credit where credit is due," but he stopped short of accusing Sheeran of appropriating Black music. He characterized the video of Sheeran's Zurich concert as a "smoking gun."

"Maya Angelou tells us that when a person shows you who they are, it's our duty to believe them," Crump declared. "When someone provides you a voluntary confession, believe them."

Ilene Farkas, a copyright specialist at the powerhouse firm Pryor Cashman, who along with Donald Zakarin led Sheeran's legal team, delivered the defense's opening. She said that the only similarities between the two songs were a common chord progression and an equally common syncopated rhythm. The plaintiffs, she argued, "cannot own these common musical elements."

On the stand, Townsend described her feelings about Sony's failure to respond to her inquiries. "I feel they've been so negligent," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "And I promised my father I would protect his work and artistry." She went on, "I have nothing against Mr. Sheeran personally. I think he's a great artist with a great future. I am simply trying to protect my father's legacy."

After lunch, the plaintiffs called Sheeran to the stand, where Rice questioned him. Sheeran testified to hearing "L.G.O." for the first time in an Austin Powers movie, but denied copying it.

Rice asked Sheeran about his song "Take It Back," which boasts about stealing rap lyrics:

> You'll find me ripping the writtens
> Out of the pages they sit in
> And never once I get bitten
> Because plagiarism is hidden

"Are those your lyrics?" Rice asked.

"Can I just give context?" Sheeran replied.

"If I need more context, I'll certainly ask," Rice said.

"I feel like you don't want me to answer because you know what I'm going to say is going to make a lot of sense," Sheeran said.

Finally, the plaintiffs played the Zurich video, which they saw as their strongest single piece of evidence. (The admissibility of the video as evidence had been the subject of much legal maneuvering by the defense, who appeared keen not to see it played.) Sheeran watched from the witness box, his moon face expressionless. Afterward, he remarked, with some heat, "Quite frankly, if I had done what you're accusing me of doing, I would be an idiot to stand on a stage in front of twenty thousand people and show that."

Sheeran is a master of the mashup. At shows, he often interpolates his songs and other people's songs, as a kind of musical party trick; he sometimes takes requests from the audience. Throughout his time on the stand, he entertained the jury and spectators by demonstrating this with an acoustic guitar that his team placed within reach of the witness box. At one point, he started singing "Thinking Out Loud," transitioned into Shania Twain's "You're Still the One," then into Bob Dylan's "Just Like a Woman," and finished with Van Morrison's "Crazy Love." Recordings of Sheeran's mashups were played: "Take It Back" with "Superstition," by Stevie Wonder, and "Ain't No Sunshine," by Bill Withers.

"You can kind of play most pop songs over most pop songs," Sheeran told the room. It was persuasive testimony, but it also helped explain why Sheeran's songs sound familiar—they're not so different from many other songs.

In the "Blurred Lines" trial, Judith Finell devoted much of her testimony to a PowerPoint presentation. Average listeners have a hard time comparing two songs aurally, she told me: "The first song doesn't stay in their memory when the second song starts playing." But, she added, "people do retain visual information." Her presentation used a time-stamped map of intervals in the two songs which showed "significant similarities" by way of color-coded charts. To critics, her presentation was all smoke and mirrors, designed to trick the jury into thinking that a collection of unprotectable elements was forensic proof that "Blurred Lines" was stained with Marvin Gaye's musical DNA.

Townsend's expert, Alexander Stewart, had also prepared a slide show, and his presentation focussed on three areas of similarity between the songs. These were several melody fragments; the syncopated rhythm that anticipated the second and fourth chords; and the progression, which Stewart claimed was, in the Roman nomenclature of chords, a I-iii-IV-V progression. He testified that, of all the songs that came before "L.G.O.," he could find only one—a version of "Georgy Girl" recorded by "a rather obscure Mexican bandleader" in 1966—that employed the same combination of chord progression and syncopation. He estimated that seventy per cent of the "musical value" of Sheeran's song was derived from Gaye and Townsend's.

Lawrence Ferrara, a professor of music at N.Y.U., was the forensic musicologist for the defense. He pointed out that the chord progression Ed Townsend had played for Gaye was so common that it was in elementary music-method books such as "How to Play Rock 'n' Roll Piano," published in 1967. He claimed that six songs had the same progression and rhythm as "L.G.O.," including Holland-Dozier-Holland's "You Lost the Sweetest Boy" (1963), sung by Mary Wells, and the Mexican recording of "Georgy Girl." (In the Seekers' hit version, the expert noted, the guitar is anticipated, but the bass plays *on* the beat.) If Sheeran were found to have illegally copied "Let's Get It On," then the rights holders of those earlier songs could claim that "L.G.O." had infringed on them, resulting in a circular firing squad of lawsuits. Ferrara variously characterized parts of Stewart's testimony as "farcical," "absurd," and "ludicrous."

Sheeran also commented on Stewart's presentation. "I think what he's doing is criminal," he said. "I don't know why he's allowed to be an expert." What annoyed Sheeran most was that Stewart heard an F-sharp minor chord at the beginning of "Thinking Out Loud." This would make it identical to the I-iii-IV-V progression in "L.G.O.," if

Sheeran's song were transposed to E-flat. But, in fact, Sheeran said, Stewart was wrong: the chord was a D over F-sharp—a D-major first inversion, which Sheeran demonstrated by strumming both progressions.

"I know what I'm playing on guitar," he said. "It's me playing it."

"And how do you know Dr. Stewart is wrong?" Farkas asked.

"I wrote it, and I play it every week, a lot," Sheeran said.

The other third of Ed Townsend's third of the "Let's Get It On" royalties, which was once owned by his son Michael, now belongs to Structured Asset Sales, an L.A.-based company founded by the financier David Pullman. Pullman is a pioneer in packaging song catalogues as investment-grade securities, a common practice today. Essentially, an investor buys a share and reaps a portion of future earnings from royalties, licensing, and new technologies like streaming. Pullman created the first of these securities, Bowie Bonds, in collaboration with David Bowie, in 1997. He has worked on similar deals for catalogues belonging to the estates of James Brown, the Isley Brothers, and Holland-Dozier-Holland, among others.

Pullman filed a separate hundred-million-dollar suit against Sony in 2018. In another legal action, he is seeking to capitalize on an amicus brief filed by the Copyright Office in the "Stairway to Heaven" case, which noted that there could be "multiple, distinct copyrightable works that are all versions of the same song." This opened up the possibility of refiling a sound recording with the Copyright Office as a new arrangement, which would be covered by the rules of the 1976 Copyright Act. After reading the brief, Pullman submitted the recording of "L.G.O." and sued Sheeran again, based on substantial similarities that were not reflected in the original deposit copy. Sheeran might well spend the rest of his life defending his tender evocation of enduring love against an implacable opponent whose name, like Arnstein's, is embedded in New York case law. (To "Pullmanize" someone is to legally remove an unwanted owner from a co-op building, named for the process that Pullman's fellow-owners on West Sixty-fourth Street went through in state court in 2001.)

Pullman now lives in an art-filled villa high atop Hollywood, with an unbeatable view of the city from his trapezoidal pool. As a music investor, he favors evergreens. In his estimation, there are so many more infringement cases these days not because of frivolous lawsuits but because of bolder instances of theft. "It used to be, you'd find a song that wasn't that big a hit," he said, in his rapid-fire speaking style. "Now they'll take hits. You have a better chance of having a hit if you take a giant hit. Why? Because people already recognize it!"

In Pullman's opinion, Sheeran is a serial infringer: "Why does he write songs so quickly? Maybe it's because parts of them are already written." He mentioned the Zurich video: "He seamlessly goes into 'Let's Get It On'—did you pick that song out of a hat? Out of sixty million registered songs, why do you pick that song? It's a tell." He recalled the well-known story of Paul McCartney going around and asking people if the melody of "Yesterday," which had come to him in a dream, was in fact remembered from another song. Today, Pullman said, it's "infringe now, worry about it later."

Pullman said that he would consider settling for a respectful sum: "I don't understand why someone wants to go through so many trials. Every case against him will just get stronger."

When I saw Kathryn Griffin Townsend in the courthouse cafeteria before closing arguments, she looked rested and happy. "Win, lose, or draw, it doesn't matter, because we won," she told me. "Now people know what happened. And they'll think before they do it again." She added, "This has never been about money."

Ilene Farkas, who closed for the defense, noted that we were all here because, exactly fifty years ago, Ed Townsend sat down at his piano and played Marvin Gaye four chords. Townsend had been free to use them to make a song, just as Sheeran should be. "Do we have to tell the eleven-year-old next Ed Sheeran that they better find out who owns that chord progression?" she asked.

Ben Crump reminded the jurors that this Ed Sheeran had threatened to quit music if they decided against him: a heavy burden. Millions of Sheeran fans would despise them, and the promoters and stadium owners involved in Sheeran's forthcoming world tour for his new album, "Subtract," would be on the hook for the cancelled shows. "That's simply a threat to try to play on your emotions," Crump said. "I promise you, no matter what your verdict is, he won't be done with music." The lawyer observed that Sheeran is, above all, a performer. "Don't be charmed," he said. "I'm sure if Ed Townsend was alive and in this court, he would have been just as charming."

The jury deliberated for less than three hours before handing its verdict to Judge Stanton: Sheeran and Wadge had independently created "Thinking Out Loud"; they had not infringed on "Let's Get It On."

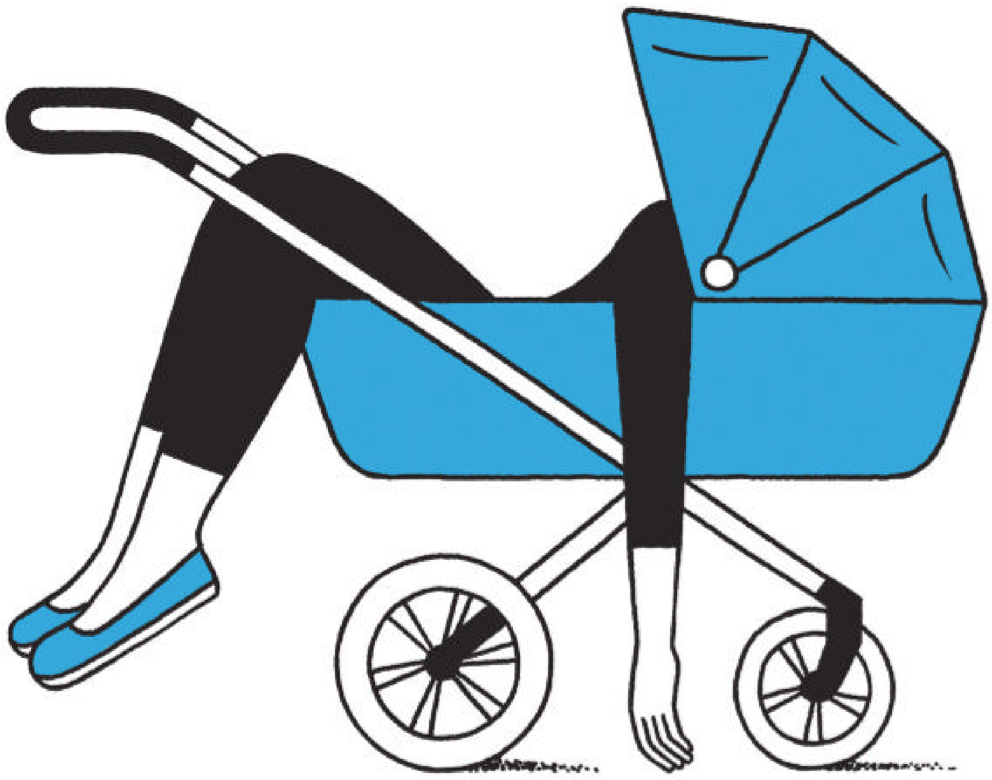
Sheeran, who had missed his paternal grandmother's funeral to testify, emotionally embraced Farkas and Zakarin. Wadge wept. The music executives looked pleased. The trial had given both songs streaming bumps.

Outside, on Worth Street, the pop star read a statement. "It looks like I'm not going to have to retire from my day job," Sheeran said. However, "I am unbelievably frustrated that baseless claims like this are allowed to go to court at all." He hoped that now he and his fellow-songwriters could "all just go back to making music." (Judge Stanton dismissed the first of Pullman's lawsuits a week later.) Then his artfully tousled head disappeared into a black S.U.V. and was gone.

Townsend did not seem at all downhearted by the verdict. She had honored her promise to her father, she told me, which was "to protect his intellectual property." She'd embraced Sheeran in the courtroom after the verdict, and they'd chatted briefly. " 'All I ever wanted to do was talk to you about this,' " she said she'd told him. " 'I'm sorry it took all this to make that happen.' "

Townsend went on to say that Sheeran had offered her tickets to his upcoming concert at NRG Stadium, in Houston. She ended up declining the offer, opting to attend her grandson's pre-K graduation instead. At the show, "Thinking Out Loud" came midway through. "Let's Get It On" did not make the set list. ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



LESSER-KNOWN POSTPARTUM MOOD DISORDERS

BY JENA FRIEDMAN

POSTPARTUM-ANXIETY ANXIETY: Anxiety that occurs when you think you may have postpartum anxiety after reading about it on an online message board you came across while struggling to breastfeed your colicky newborn at 3 A.M.

INSTA-MOM AFFECTIVE DISORDER: Feelings of sadness associated with scrolling Instagram, compounded by the fact that the algorithm now knows that you're a new mom and has started flooding your feed with videos of other new moms making it all look so easy, as well as ads for stuff you might not be able to afford but will buy anyway because you haven't slept in months and your defenses are down.

POSTPARTUM AMAZON AMNESIA: An impulse-control disorder that involves purchasing every single baby-related item on Amazon that any person or ad recommends, in an effort to help your baby sleep more or cry less, or sleep more and cry less, and then forgetting that you've purchased those items and accidentally buying them again.

UNSPECIFIED HOSPITAL-PRIVATIZATION DISORDER: Totally rational feelings of insanity that occur when the nurse leaves a screaming infant in your hospital room for you to care for—even though you had a C-section less than twenty-four hours ago and can barely sit up, let alone tend to anyone else—because the maternity ward has shuttered its nursery under the guise of a "baby-friendly initiative" that's really just a ploy to cut costs now that the hospital has been privatized.

POSTPAWTUM DOGPRESSION: Melancholia associated with watching your once cherished geriatric Chihuahua be reduced to a shell of his former self after being dethroned by a human baby.

POSTPUNDUMB DUMBPRESSION: Depression upon realizing that, thanks to your post-pregnancy brain fog, you've completely lost your edge, which manifests in your increasing reliance on mediocre puns.

POSTPARTY DEPRESHY: A cutesy nickname for postpartum depression which your cool new mom friend has coined to minimize the severity of this very real, destabilizing disorder.

YOUR-COOL-NEW-MOM-FRIEND-GETTING-OVER-HER-POSTPARTY-DEPRESHY DEPRESSION: When the cool new mom with whom you've commiserated for the past three months suddenly gets over her postpartum depression and so now you go on those sad, meandering walks (with your fussy infant strapped to your body) alone.

PRE-WEANING DEPRESSION: Depression associated with learning that "post-weaning depression" is a real thing (Google it!) and wondering how, after struggling for months just to breastfeed, it's possible that you are expected to feel even worse after you stop.

NOT-GETTING-PAID-LEAVE PERSONALITY DISORDER: It's not the government's fault for not mandating paid leave for new parents or providing a social safety net like every other developed nation in the world. It's your fault for not working in finance like your sister!

UNSPECIFIED POSTPARTUM POST-ROE RAGE: Palpable rage associated with witnessing the G.O.P.'s war on reproductive autonomy through the lens of someone who wanted her pregnancy and wondering how anyone could vote for lawmakers who claim to be "pro-life" (but who don't actually care about life because, if they did, they would support things like sex education, access to contraceptives, and science-backed policies that improve maternal-fetal health) and ranting about this to your male ob-gyn, who chalks it up to postpartum depression and offers you a prescription for Valium.

POST-POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION: When you continue to experience depressive symptoms—which can mostly be attributed to living in a society that makes it nearly impossible for new moms (or pretty much anyone who's not a billionaire) to thrive—long after being diagnosed with postpartum depression but you can no longer blame them on postpartum depression because it's been, like, twelve years since you gave birth. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

FRONT MAN

Matty Healy, of the 1975, remains torn between the heartfelt and the arch.

BY JIA TOLENTINO



In January, the thirty-four-year-old British rock star Matty Healy woke up on a couch in his house, except it was not his house, it was a stage set at the O2 Arena, in London, and twenty thousand people were there with him, screaming. His band, the 1975, stood in position among wood-panelled walls and framed family photos, and Healy—skinny, in a close-cut suit and a tie, black curls slicked back behind his ears—rose and dramatically blinked at the lights, took a swig from a flask, and sat down at a piano. Then he lit a cigarette and began to play the jittery riff that opens the band's latest album, "Being Funny in a Foreign Language." "You're making an aesthetic out of not doing well / And mining all the bits of you you think you can sell," he sang, taking long pulls from a bottle of red wine as the audience roared.

He sang the song's refrain: "I'm sorry if you're living and you're seventeen." When Healy and his three bandmates were that age—they have been a band, and best friends, for twenty years—they were mostly concerned with shows, records, parties, and girls, and they believed earnestly in the power of art to free themselves and change the world. Now, as Healy sees things, the average seventeen-year-old is worried about melting ice caps, or the failures of capitalism, or how easy it is to say the wrong thing. The future holds little imagined promise, and, to cope, teens are indulging in reactionary conservatism or the oppression Olympics, the world and their identities distorted by social media.

Nowadays, Healy says, we want artists to be liberal academics, not bohemians.

Healy is something of a test case for the digital panopticon and its reaction cycles. Though he has always run his mouth, he long seemed dedicated to saying the right thing, eventually, and getting praised for it. He sometimes ceded his spotlight to the voices of women. The band's last album, "Notes on a Conditional Form," from 2020, opens with a monologue about the climate crisis delivered by Greta Thunberg. When the 1975 won the British equivalent of a Grammy, Healy, in an acceptance speech, read a snippet of an essay by the writer Laura Snapes about misogyny in music. Fans asked him to take a stand on other things—Israel and Palestine, police abolition—but his politics, by his own estimation, are not particularly radical, and he was not the voice for activism that some wanted him to be. In May, 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, he tweeted, "If you truly believe that 'ALL LIVES MATTER' you need to stop facilitating the end of black ones," and appended a link to the 1975's most anthemic song, "Love It If We Made It," which begins, "We're fucking in a car, shooting heroin / Saying controversial things just for the hell of it / Selling melanin then suffocate the black man / Start with misdemeanors and we'll make a business out of them." It was, to Healy, the clearest way to articulate his thoughts about racial injustice and police brutality, but people perceived it as a callous attempt to promote the band.

He deactivated his Twitter account and began the slow heel turn that has brought him to his current persona: a post-woke rock star, switching unpredictably between tenderness and trollishness. He stayed on Instagram, where he constantly made fun of both himself and the fans who seemed obsessed with his morality. He likened his music to a YouTube video titled "Sound Effect—Grown Man Crying Like a Little Baby." When a fan messaged him to ask why he followed the Kenosha shooter Kyle Rittenhouse and the self-declared misogynist Andrew Tate on the platform, he posted the message, along with a reply: "We are starting a band." On tour, he began kissing fans onstage, and these moments kept going viral—he sucked a girl's thumb, he kissed a boy, he kissed

 ILLUSTRATION BY ALEXIS BEAUCLAIR

Ross MacDonald, the band's bassist. In the middle of one show, he lay back on a couch onstage as a tattoo artist inked the words "iM a MaN" on his torso. He inspired articles about the resurgence of the sleazeball and the appeal of the sensitive dirtbag. He sang like a louche Elvis and played a lipstick-red guitar.

"If you do a show that's about the duality of your life, is it still Method acting?" he asked between songs at the O2. The house lights came on, and white-coated technicians touched up the band members' clothes and faces. A tech slammed a clapboard, and they resumed their positions, concluding the meta intrusion.

The band resumed playing against the house-in-the-suburbs backdrop; the crowd sang along blissfully to a bouncy song about a school shooting. At the halfway point, there was a theatrical interlude, in which Healy, alone on the stage, played the role of one of the confused young men he'd been singing about. He unbuttoned his shirt and mimed masturbation; he desperately embraced a stage tech. While TVs blared footage of Tory politicians, he pretended to make out with himself, hands travelling up and down his back. I'd seen the same show at Madison Square Garden a few months before, and I'd cringed at this part, initially. Then Healy knelt in front of a raw steak, took an enormous bite, did a couple of dozen pushups, and squeezed his entire body through a small screenless television. His willingness to be embarrassing and abrasive edged into a kind of generosity, and a vulnerability. This is the heart of his appeal.

A few minutes later, the crowd went nuclear, but not for him: Taylor Swift, in a mirrored minidress, had walked onstage, performing "Anti-Hero," from her most recent album. "Did you hear my covert narcissism I disguise as altruism/Like some kind of congressman," she sang. Swift has been a fan of the band since at least 2014, when she was photographed wearing a 1975 T-shirt. Rumors circulated, at the time, that she and Healy were dating. (Healy, hounded for months to comment, said that having "Taylor Swift's boyfriend" as one's public identity would be an "emasculating thing.") "Anti-Hero" is self-deprecating and self-consciously Zeitgeist-y, with convoluted lyrics wrapped so tightly around the melody that they somehow seem tossed off—in other words, it's a little like a song by the 1975. She then performed "The City," a song from the band's first album. Girls around me were sobbing, as if they'd just gone blind looking at a solar eclipse.

"It's the last rock-and-roll show in town," Healy said after Swift had left and the band had returned for the second half, a set of hits culled from their first four records. After two decades together, the 1975 is as tight and instinctive as a legacy act. Healy's shape-shifting voice—he croons and wails and screams and murmurs, shading his delivery with a variety of personae—laces together the band's encyclopedic set of pop references: the soaring urgency of Peter Gabriel, the muscular propulsion of Bruce Springsteen, the addled funk of Talking Heads. Against the set dressing, Healy looked like a drunk boy dancing in his living room, ripping cigarettes and blowing kisses.

By 4 P.M. the next day, the band was back at the O2, sound-checking without him. The word backstage was that Swift had stayed until 3:30 A.M. the night before, singing 1975 songs with the band's bookkeeper after Healy had gone home. He arrived late, wearing a hoodie pulled tight around his face, like a "South Park" character. He started to light a cigarette, then saw that a child—MacDonald's niece—was lounging on the couch onstage, and put the cigarette away, laughing at himself. Healy led the band through a revised version of the interlude with the technicians, in which he'd tell the audience that nothing in the show was real. "For example, if I were to say stop," he said, rehearsing the bit—and everyone onstage froze, until he said, "Go." Someone suggested a tweak. "Yeah, but that's not *conceptual*," he replied.

Afterward, he walked onto the empty floor of the arena, and I asked him about Swift's cameo. "It was really based of Taylor to do the show," he said, seeming a bit awed that it had happened. A fake set list was circulating on Twitter showing Harry Styles as the guest for that night's performance. In the British press, Healy is sometimes positioned as Styles's Wario, his evil twin. Their bands became popular around the same time; both men are straight-leaning but, like Mick Jagger and David Bowie before them, enjoy revelling in sexual ambiguity. Healy said the band had asked Styles to come. "He gave us a *hard* no," he added, laughing. "He's afraid that he would have to say *something*." Healy found it annoying that, at a certain level of fame, celebrities can cultivate liberal auras while avoiding the risk of taking real political stands. (Swift, I thought, but didn't say, seemed to be excepted from his critique.)

He headed to the greenroom, where a mellow family vibe prevailed. MacDonald had been joined there by his niece; George Daniel, the drummer, was sitting with his girlfriend, the pop star Charli XCX. It has been alleged online that Healy is actually, secretly, five feet five inches tall; in truth, he looks short onstage only because Daniel and MacDonald are both six-four. (Healy says he's five-eleven; I'd guess five-ten.) Adam Hann, the guitarist, was also backstage, with his wife, Carly. The two have a one-year-old son. They had woken up at home just a few hours after Swift had left the O2.

Healy had skipped his make-out routine during the previous night's show. "I'm not kissing anybody in front of Taylor Swift, have some respect," he'd said. On night two, the fans reached for him with grasping fingers and tormented faces, a tangled mass of limbs, like a scene out of Hieronymus Bosch. Healy kissed one, then his face was grabbed by two others. He did his pushups and crawled through the TV. He told the crowd that Swift wasn't coming and that, instead, they could expect five extra minutes of his thoughts on industrial action (the night before, he'd given a shout-out to striking railway workers). He also talked about how the right was better than the left at offering anxious young men a path for their floundering masculinity. "All I can tell is that I'm a bloke, I'm confused, and I'm definitely on the left"—a roar of approval cut him off. "Shut up," he said, dismissing the reflexive praise.

The next day in London, it was mild and drizzly. I met Healy at a private club, a Soho House spinoff in Notting Hill known as the Electric. Young mothers with blond blowouts fed their children scrambled eggs amid old-fashioned wallpaper and framed

black-and-white prints. Healy was carefully dressed: a pressed white shirt, perfectly shined shoes. He ordered orange juice and a steak.

"Steak?" I asked. "Again?"

Healy explained that he was from "circus stock" and needed to eat a lot of protein to keep muscle on. "My grandparents are from the circus—like, Irish travelling circus on both sides. I come from this really sinewy line of contortionists."

There are many performers in Healy's family. His mother's father, Vin Welch, was a successful drag queen, and both his parents are actors. Tim Healy, his father, was a welder before he joined a theatre company that staged productions in community halls. He met Denise Welch, who'd been onstage since her teens, at an audition in Newcastle. Matty was born in 1989, the year after they were married. His parents got TV work and became known as working-class heroes; Healy got used to holding their hands, patiently, as strangers waylaid them on the street. He found it confusing to grow up with parents who pretended to be other people for a living—he'd go to meet his mom on set and find that it was suddenly the eighteen-fifties and she was an old woman. One night, in a dark theatre, he watched his father take a punch under the stage lights, and went into a panicked spiral: his dad was getting hurt in front of everyone, but he couldn't do or even say anything about it.

The year he turned eight, his mother was cast on the soap opera "Coronation Street," which has been on the air in the U.K. since 1960 and which, in the nineties, regularly attracted nearly twenty million viewers. Welch has said that she began drinking heavily to deal with the pressures of the role; her alcoholism, and her marriage, became popular subjects of tabloid scrutiny. (She and Healy's father divorced in 2012; Welch recently celebrated eleven years of sobriety.) Healy told me, "I'd be a child, and something would happen in my real life, and then I'd see that thing on a newspaper, and I'd think, That's not what happened, but that's my mum saying a version of what happened, and I know Mum's at home and she's O.K." He came to understand that a person's life was "a balance between what is real, what is said, what happens, what people believe, what people project, and what is true."

"The Truman Show," in which Jim Carrey plays the unwitting, lifelong star of an always-on reality series, came out when Healy was nine, and he developed an intrusive fear that the movie was, in some way, about his own life. His parents were actors—what if everything was a loveless farce? On a vacation in Spain, in a taxi, his dad teased him about this ongoing neurosis, and Denise turned around from the front seat and told Tim to stop it. "She meant, Don't wind him up, he's obviously freaking out about this," Healy explained. "But I read that as one actor saying to another actor, 'Hush, you're going to give up the gig.'"

Newly flush with TV money, the Healys moved to Wilmslow, a posh Manchester suburb—"basically three square miles where Manchester United players live," Healy said—and he was sent to an all-boys private school. "Because I hadn't come from that culture, I was very aware of this hypermasculinity, and this desire for domination," he told me. He started a fight club in a locker room, charging fifty pence for admission and splitting the money with the fighters. He was expelled and returned to the local public schools, where he met Daniel, MacDonald, and Hann. They were all thirteen, they hung out in the music wing, and they formed an emo band that cycled through a series of emo names: Me and You Versus Them, Forever Drawing Six, the Slowdown, Drive Like I Do. They went through puberty as a unit and developed their identities symbiotically. One day, they all did MDMA for the first time, lying on the floor in the Healys' house, listening to music and feeling as if they had never truly heard it before.

Healy, an autodidact, didn't go to college; he streamed lectures on YouTube. The three others went to university in Manchester, to keep the band together. All four worked as delivery drivers at a Chinese restaurant. They played gigs and recorded songs but attracted no professional interest: their sound bounced around among pop genres, and they didn't fit into an indie scene dominated by bands such as Arcade Fire and Grizzly Bear, which leaned artsy and baroque. The 1975 weren't inheritors of Manchester's hard-edged musical lineage, either. "We looked like effeminate Catholic schoolboys," Healy said. "It wasn't exactly Oasis." A young music manager named Jamie Oborne heard some tracks they'd uploaded to YouTube and took them on as clients in 2007. All the big labels passed, so he founded a label of his own, Dirty Hit, in partnership with the band. Over bowls of pasta, the 1975 signed a deal.

Their first EP came out in 2012. Their breakout song was "Sex," a shimmery anthem about grimy teen-age lust: in 2013, the influential BBC d.j. Zane Lowe declared it the hottest record in the world. They developed a small but intense following, primarily consisting of music-blog obsessives and teen-age girls. Their first album hit No. 1 in the U.K., as did every album that followed it, but they didn't seem to have any ca-



"I'm not angry, I'm just disappointed. And, to be honest, I'm not really disappointed, either, I'm just hungry."

sual listeners. "We're the biggest band in the world that nobody's ever heard of," Healy often said.

After finishing lunch, Healy and I headed to the roof of the Electric. A ponytailed bartender with "LOVE IT IF WE MADE IT" tattooed on his arm stopped Healy to praise the previous night's show and to thank him for getting him tickets. ("Did I do that?" Healy wondered later. "Guess I must have.") Healy's stream of consciousness is constantly swirling; he is fervent and buzzing and unexpectedly solicitous. He was recently diagnosed with A.D.H.D. When I asked him if he was surprised, we both started laughing.

In 2014, amid the early rush of fame and steady touring, Healy began smoking heroin, the only substance he found that could pull him down from the stratosphere. It was a secret, for a while; then the band staged an intervention. Healy resisted: he was the star, and the rest of them would have to get on board. He woke up the next day feeling like a fool and told Daniel he would go to rehab. He spent seven weeks at a center in Barbados, then flew back to London and immediately used again. "And then I used a little bit longer," he said, "and then I was just, like, Fuck, Matty, what are you doing? What you going to do if the guys find out?" He quit cold turkey in 2018. He's not involved with a formal sobriety program—he often seems drunk by the end of the live show, though he described this as an act only partly rooted in reality. "A lot of people will know that, given my history, I can hack a bottle of red wine over two hours," he said.

When I asked him what differentiated the 1975 from Matty Healy, solo pop act, he said, "It kind of *is* that." At various points, he's recorded music to use for a solo project, but so far it has all ended up going to the band. They depend on one another, he said. "We know when I'm addicted to smack, and we pick me up. George is dramatically depressed—we rally around him. One of us had a baby—so *we* had a baby, and when the baby is backstage, the greenroom is like a crèche. There's a 'Wizard of Oz' element to us. One of us needs a heart, one of us needs a brain, one of us needs this other thing, and we're all on the road together."

A year or so ago, the band turned down the opportunity to open for Ed Sheeran. On the roof, as Healy smoked his millionth cigarette, I asked him what was so precious about the 1975 that it would fall apart if they took that slot. "If you're someone's favorite band, that takes a lot of real emotional investment," he said, paraphrasing something that the producer Jack Antonoff had told him. "Let's say that relationship is, analogously, us talking here. I'm your favor-



ite band, and you are the audience. If at some point in our conversation I start going like *this* all the time"—he looked pointedly over my shoulder, toward the pastel buildings of Notting Hill—"and you know over there is money, fame, personal enjoyment, whatever it is, you'll just go, 'O.K., I'll get another favorite band.'" Healy looked back at me closely. We had been talking for several hours, and I realized that the moment he looked over my shoulder was the first time he had broken eye contact.

Across their first four albums, the 1975 became more and more eclectic. They followed up their emo-inflected début with an eighties-style synth-pop record bearing the majestically corny title "I Like It When You Sleep, for You Are So Beautiful Yet So Unaware of It." In a review for Pitchfork, Laura Snapes—whom Healy later quoted in his acceptance speech—wrote that "for every neatly zeitgeist-capturing couplet" there was a lyric that made Healy "sound like the trustafarian street poet that he already slightly resembles." She described the album as "the X-rated cousin of Taylor Swift's *1989*." Then came "A Brief Inquiry Into Online Relationships," a maximalist statement record with bits of tropical house, a spoken-word track recited by Siri, and several immaculate pop singles. It got the best reviews of the band's career. "Notes on a Conditional Form" arrived next. It veers from garage to industrial and ambient music with some dabbling in country. "We always used to say that our attention spans were so bad that we had to do a million things," George Daniel told me. "But it was actually a product of insecurity, where we thought sounding like a band wasn't good enough—we had to do an orchestral piece, we had to do this or that. We felt like we couldn't do a short, coherent album."

Drummers tend either to vibrate with manic energy or to radiate a profound stillness. Daniel falls into the latter category, to the point that, when we spoke on Zoom, I kept thinking his screen had frozen. He and Healy have always made the band's music together: Healy writes most of the lyrics and many of the melodies, and Daniel, who studied music production in college, designs the sound. "In a way, Matty and George are opposites," Antonoff told me. Healy is a "wonderful balloon, who loves to fly out there but also wants to be held," he said; Daniel, then, is steady on the ground, hand tight around the string.

In 2021, though, they hit a wall. Healy had gone through a tough breakup with the musician FKA Twigs. Daniel, meanwhile, was dealing with depression. "We found it hard to get anything done musically, because we were both so acutely aware of the other person's suffering," he said. He described his dynamic with Healy as the kind you have with a romantic partner: "You love them more than anyone else in the world, and you cut them less slack than anyone else in the world."

Then they brought in Antonoff, whose band, Bleachers, came up around the same time as the 1975, but who is better known for producing Swift, Lana Del Rey, Lorde, and seemingly every other big name in pop. The safest thing for the 1975 to do, Antonoff said, would be to venture further into the esoteric; the surprising and brave thing would be to make a really good, straightforward album, as simple and as complex as a perfect slice of pizza. The band, with Antonoff, set rules in the studio. Everyone would play everything together, in real time, as much as possible. Healy wouldn't do any of the backing vocals, so that the album would be

replicable live. Everyone would play analog instruments, and, ideally, ones they didn't normally play.

"Being Funny in a Foreign Language" ended up an album in pursuit of love, rendered plainly. "Before, I always debased myself when I became sincere," Healy told me. "I'd be sincere, and then I'd say, 'Oh, I'm only joking,' or 'Oh, I pissed myself,' or something else unglamorous to negate how much I just let you in." At one point, in the studio, he was recording vocals for a track that became "I'm in Love with You," and he kept trying to sneak a "not" into the chorus. Hann stopped him, and said, "Dude, five albums in, everyone knows you're funny. So if you want to say 'I'm in love with you' then just do it. Say it. That's where you're at." Healy told me, "All of the things that used to define my work, or the nihilistic part of one's twenties—postmodernism, addiction, individualism—they're all cool and sexy and appropriate at the time, but, for me now, are those the things I yearn for?" In his personal life, he had found himself wishing for consistency and reliability, "the things we get from a partner that we don't get from the rest of the world."

"I think Matty is a deeply sincere person, who can, at different points, be misunderstood because of how much he enjoys a bit," Antonoff said. "If you don't know him, if you don't get him, because you're not really tuned in to the work, you might assume a cynicism that is literally not there." He mentioned the song "Part of the Band." The lyrics are inflected with Healy's persona games, his compulsion to comment on the politics of pop culture, and at least three references to ejaculation. Healy sings, "Am I ironically woke? The butt of my joke? / Or am I just some post-coke, average, skinny bloke / Calling his ego imagination?" And yet it's a beautiful—and, somehow, even understated—song, set to a "Street Hassle"-style backdrop of lilting, bittersweet strings. "That to me is the most exciting part of him and his work," Antonoff said. "That the façade of it can beg so many questions, but that the heart is still so obvious—that it's this deep sincerity, and a longing for love, to love, to be loved."

Still, Healy remains caught between the heartfelt and the arch. On the second night at the O2, after calling the right wing's appeal to men "dangerous," he seemed suddenly self-conscious about his righteous pose. "I also really don't care that much, to be honest," he said. On the roof of the Electric, he launched into a passionate rant about the banjo player Winston Marshall, who'd left the band Mumford & Sons after praising the alt-right Twitter figure Andy Ngo and prompting an online furor. Marshall, as Healy saw it, had been radicalized not so much by right-wing ideas as by the praise and attention he'd got from right-wing circles—this, Healy said, is the situation for all sorts of young men whose world views are getting distorted by online feedback loops. Then he said, again, that he didn't really care that much.

"It seems like you do care," I said. "Otherwise you wouldn't keep bringing it up."

"I do," he admitted. "It's a good point."

Healy often laments that "we used to expect our artists to be cigarette-smoking bohemian outsiders, and now we expect them to be liberal academics." He has also said that, although he doesn't count his political views as particularly educated or authoritative, he knows that they stem from impulses toward empathy and freedom that are important.

"What do I mean when I say I don't care?" he asked. "What is that apathy I speak of? It's an exhaustion, maybe. The truth is, when I go home, this is not the shit I'm dealing with. I'm not dealing with the crisis of masculinity. I'm dealing with how my mum's feeling, what Ross is going through. I'm trying to be in service to people." He was no longer invested in the project of being publicly correct. "I've done my decade of trying to be that," he said. "I'm more interested in actually being wrong, and people seeing that, and knowing what's right because of it."

A month later, Healy went on a podcast called "The Adam Friedland Show." Friedland, whom Healy had befriended in the past couple of years, used to host the podcast "Cum Town," a title that reflects the "Borat"-esque level of seriousness that he and his co-hosts generally brought to the table. Friedland is part of a downtown New York scene referred to as Dimes Square, which, during the pandemic, became widely known for an ostensibly transgressive rejection of liberal pieties and a reactionary brand of post-left politics particularly associated with another podcast, "Red Scare." Healy has sometimes been spotted wearing a "Red Scare" hat; he told me that he became a fan in part because he was attracted to differences in opinion, and also to one of the hosts, whom he described as "really sexy."

On "The Adam Friedland Show," Healy and the hosts roamed more or less randomly around the cultural landscape, cracking jokes. One of the hosts asked if the rapper Ice Spice, who is of Nigerian and Dominican descent, was an Inuit Spice Girl, and the group then did crude approximations of an Inuit accent, veering from vaguely Chinese to quasi-Hawaiian. Later, he laughed as the hosts did impressions of hypothetical Japanese guards at German concentration camps. He joked about watching the brutal porn channel Ghetto Gaggers. After the episode went up, outraged headlines and furious tweets—"matty healy, how are you getting on stage every night and mocking toxic masculinity and then going on a podcast and undoing the whole thing by being wildly ignorant, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, everything else under the sun"—predictably ensued.

Healy had reached the level of fame that makes celebrities start speaking like politicians, even as he was still skinning his psyche for his performances. Aside from the podcast controversy, he was getting slammed for "doing a Nazi salute" onstage, a gesture he made, rather crucially, while singing a litany of horrors in "Love It If We Made It," including a line that quotes Donald Trump's praise of Kanye West. He didn't apologize or comment on the uproar, but he did seem more outwardly subdued afterward. When the band came to New York to perform on "Saturday Night Live," he played it straight, crooning in an unbuttoned tux. We met for lunch again, downtown, at Balthazar, a couple of days later. He was wearing another white shirt, but open to the chest this time, his tattoos showing.

I asked him about the podcast. He'd been doing so much promo, he told

me, that he wanted to do something that felt more like simply talking with his friends. But, of course, he had done this all in public, on mike. Had he baited his fans on purpose? "A little bit," he said. "But it doesn't actually matter. Nobody is sitting there at night slumped at their computer, and their boyfriend comes over and goes, 'What's wrong, darling?' and they go, 'It's just this thing with Matty Healy.' That doesn't happen."

"Maybe it does," I said.

"If it does," he said, "you're either deluded or you are, sorry, a liar. You're either lying that you are hurt, or you're a bit mental for being hurt. It's just people going, 'Oh, there's a bad thing over there, let me get as close to it as possible so you can see how good I am.' And I kind of want them to do that, because they're demonstrating something so base level."

The night before, he'd hung out with the indie filmmaker Caveh Zahedi, who has cannibalized his relationships for his art. (In his first film, Zahedi tries, unsuccessfully, to make his estranged father and brother take Ecstasy with him, on camera. His most famous movie is an autobiographical comedy called "I Am a Sex Addict.") Not long before our lunch, Healy, on Instagram, had uploaded a short film he'd made, in which he plays his "real" self, first watching porn in a hotel room, then practicing being perfectly natural and lovely with selfie-requesting fans. "You wanna take it or you want me to take it?" Healy asks, before tilting his head to rest on the head of an imaginary girl. Then we see him walking around New York, and watch actual fans stop him and ask for selfies. "You wanna take it or you want me to take it?" he asks. Healy said that he admires Zahedi, but that he's wary of heading further in that direction.

"Like, I think the whole exaggeration of my shit throughout the past year and a half, maybe it proves there's something oppositional happening, that I'm getting something out of my system," he told me. "Because the truth is, I'm really quite anxious. We're all anxious, but at the moment I'm really anxious." It had something to do, he suggested, with his desire to be stoic, because stoic means masculine. "And this doesn't come from having an oppressive father who doesn't communicate," he added. His dad, he said, was open and soft, the one who passed on his belief in art as a vessel for radical truth. His mom was the "gobby" one—mouthy and intense. She's still on TV every day, on a talk show called "Loose Women," a rough analogue of "The View." She also has a podcast called "Denise Welch's Juicy Crack." ("Crack" is U.K. slang for gossip. At Balthazar, Healy, with weary affection, deadpanned a podcast tagline: "Come on Denise's juicy crack!")

Healy touched his "iM a MaN" tattoo, on his rib cage. "This whole thing, it comes from something real," he said. "I'm always sort of"—he mimed shadowboxing, nervously pumping himself up. "And this is all just a mental thing to be doing."

We finished lunch, then talked for a while longer outside, under an awning, as Healy smoked a cigarette. "I'm not trying to make myself famous," he said. "I want to be known for what I do. But now fame is about being known for who you are. And people are complicated." Girls were camping out on the sidewalk beside his hotel, stalking him all over the city. "If people are going to make me this famous, I'm going to make people work for it," he said.

The band was headed to South America, then to Australia. There, in April, he announced that he was quitting social media altogether—another turn. The 1975 was an "eras band," he said, and "the era of me being a fucking asshole is gonna come to an end . . . I've had enough." It sounded sincere, but the wording was curious; fans started to speculate that he was alluding to Taylor Swift, who had recently begun her Eras Tour, and that he was cleaning up his act in preparation for an announcement that they were dating. Was this a performance, or an existential shift? What would be the difference?

In May, tabloids reported that Healy and Swift were an item. Both of them, onstage during their respective tours, seemed to conspicuously mouth the words "This is about you, you know who you are, I love you." Healy flew from the Asia leg of his tour, in the Philippines, to attend Swift's show in Nashville. There was chatter, online, that it was a joke, or a publicity stunt, or perhaps simply two ardent self-chroniclers gathering material about intertwined egos for devastating pop albums to come. Neither of their representatives would comment on the record, but I kept getting texts from people who knew them, and who insisted: this time, it's real. ♦





A REPORTER AT LARGE

ONE FOR THE MONEY

How to hire a pop star for your private party.

BY EVAN OSNOS

If you have a few million dollars to spare, you can get Drake for a bar mitzvah or the Rolling Stones for a birthday. Flo Rida,



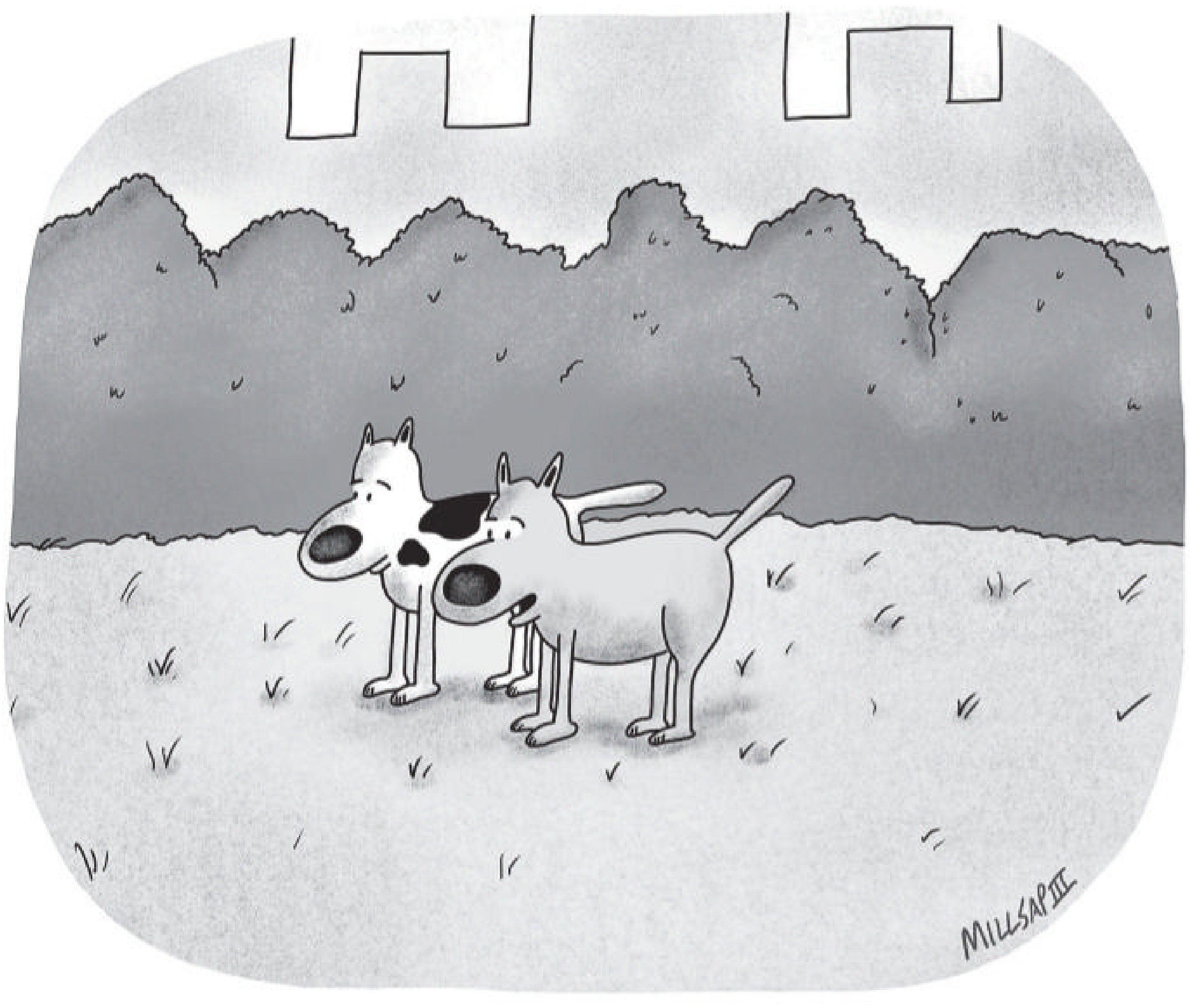
a veteran of the private-gig market, has honed a routine. "I come for a purpose," he says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY VICTOR LLORENTE

At ten o'clock on a recent Saturday night, the rapper Flo Rida was in his dressing room with a towel over his head, in a mode of quiet preparation. Along one wall, a handsome buffet—lobster, sushi, Dom Pérignon—sat untouched. Flo Rida, whose stage name honors his home state but is pronounced like "flow rider," is fastidious about his physique. He is six feet three, two hundred and twenty pounds, and often travels with a trainer, though on this occasion the trip was brief enough that he would do without. That afternoon, a private jet had carried him, along with eight of his backup performers and assistants, from South Florida to Chicago. By the following night, he would be back at his mansion in Miami.

Flo Rida, who is forty-three, attained celebrity in 2008 with his song "Low," an admiring ode to a Rubenesque beauty on the dance floor. "Low" went platinum ten times over and was No. 1 on the *Billboard* charts for ten weeks—a longer run than any other song that year, including Beyoncé's "Single Ladies." In 2009, Flo landed another No. 1 hit, "Right Round," which broke a world record, jointly held by Eminem, 50 Cent, and Dr. Dre, for the most downloads in an opening week. Flo never matched the stardom of those peers, but he has recorded another nine Top Ten hits, sold at least a hundred million records, and secured for himself a lucrative glide from ubiquity. His endorsement deals are of sufficient scale that, in a recent breach-of-contract dispute with one of his brand partners, Celsius energy drinks, a jury awarded him eighty-three million dollars.

A man with this kind of nest egg might never need to leave home again. But, on this evening, Flo had journeyed north on business: he was playing a bar mitzvah, for a thirteen-year-old boy and three dozen of his friends, in the well-to-do Chicago suburb of Lincolnshire. The bar-mitzvah boy, in keeping with the customs of his forebears, had chanted his way into adulthood; then, following a more recent tradition, the celebrants had relocated to a warehouse-size event venue that is highly regarded on Chicago's mitzvah circuit. A production company had installed the décor, including roller coasters stencilled across the dance floor and a banquet table made to resemble a red Ferrari. The whole affair was invisible to the outside world, except for the word "Andrew" projected by brilliant red floodlights onto an exterior wall.



"Being outside makes me appreciate how much I enjoy living indoors."

The entertainment had been arranged by Andrew's father, an executive at a financial-services company. At first, he had doubted that Flo Rida, his son's favorite artist, would agree to come, but an agent informed him that most big-name musicians are available these days, under the right conditions. Flo Rida's fee for private gigs in the United States runs between a hundred and fifty thousand and three hundred thousand dollars, depending on location, scale, and other particulars. Reginald Mathis, his lawyer, told me, "Internationally, it could run you up to a million." For the Lincolnshire bar mitzvah, the contract stipulated private-jet travel, suitable accommodations, and a fee "in the six figures," Mathis said; Flo Rida would perform for thirty minutes. When I saw Andrew's father at the event, he was thrilled with the outcome but declined to have his name in this story. "I work on Wall Street," he told me. "I don't want to end up on Page Six."

As showtime approached, Flo changed from his travel T-shirt and jeans into performance attire: a much nicer T-shirt (vintage Kiss concert merch), a sleeveless black biker jacket, and cat-eye shades speckled with rhinestones. While the opening act finished up, I stepped out of the dressing room to assess the crowd. From a balcony overlooking the dance floor, surrounded by a hefty array of professional-grade lights and speakers, I watched a desultory turn of the hora, backed by a recorded Hava Nagila. The children seemed preoccupied. Then a platoon of production staff started handing out flashing L.E.D. sticks, and the kids rushed toward the stage in anticipation.

I was joined on the balcony by one of Flo's bandmates, a younger rapper known as Int'l Nephew, who wore a red sweatband and a black puffy vest over a tank top. We peered across the railing toward the back of the room, where a few dozen parents were sipping cocktails. In the realm of private gigs, those secondary guests are a high-priority demographic—future clients who don't yet know it. Int'l Nephew saw the makings of a worthwhile trip. "They're all big-money people," he said. "And they're, like, 'Oh, we want *you*, Flo.'"

By the time Flo Rida bounded onstage, his hands to the heavens, the kids were bouncing to the opening strains of

"Good Feeling," one of his club hits, featuring the sampled voice of Etta James. The edge of the stage was lined by teenage boys in untucked shirts and jeans, alongside girls in spaghetti-strap dresses and chunky sneakers. Flo was flanked by dancers in black leather bikini tops and mesh leggings. Out of the audience's view, he kept a set list inscribed with the names of his hosts, as an aide-mémoire. "We love you, Andrew!" he shouted, and barrelled into "Right Round," a rowdy track about visiting a strip club and showering a pole dancer with hundred-dollar bills. When he pulled Andrew onstage, the bar-mitzvah boy didn't miss a beat, dancing along to Flo's verse: "From the top of the pole I watch her go down / She got me throwing my money around."

A private, as it's known in the music business, is any performance off limits to the public; the term applies to a vast spectrum of gigs, from suburban Sweet Sixteens and Upper East Side charity galas to command performances in the Persian Gulf. For years, the world of privates was dominated by aging crooners, a category known delicately as "nostalgia performers." Jacqueline Sabec, an entertainment lawyer in San Francisco, who has negotiated many private-gig contracts, told me, "Artists used to say no to these all the time, because they just weren't cool."

But misgivings have receded dramatically. In January, Beyoncé did her first show in more than four years—not in a stadium of screaming fans but at a new hotel in Dubai, earning a reported twenty-four million dollars for an hour-long set. More than a few Beyoncé fans winced; after dedicating a recent album to pioneers of queer culture, she was plumping for a hotel owned by the government of Dubai, which criminalizes homosexuality. (As a popular tweet put it, "I get it, everyone wants their coin, but when you're THAT rich, is it THAT worth it?") Artists, by and large, did not join the critics. Charles Ruggiero, a drummer in Los Angeles who is active in jazz and rock, told me, "The way musicians look at it, generally speaking, is: It's a fucking gig. And a gig is a gig is a gig."

If you have a few million dollars to spare, you can hire Drake for your bar mitzvah or the Rolling Stones for your birthday party. Robert Norman, who heads the private-events department at the talent agency C.A.A., recalls that when he joined the firm, a quarter century ago, "we were booking one or two hundred private dates a year, for middle-of-the-road artists that you'd typically suspect would play these kinds of events—conventions and things like that." Since then, privates have ballooned in frequency, price, and genre. "Last year, we booked almost six hundred dates, and we've got a team of people here who are dedicated just to private events," Norman said. An agent at another big firm told me, "A lot of people will say, 'Hey, can you send me your private/corporate roster?' And I'm, like, 'Just look at our whole roster, because everybody's pretty much willing to consider an offer.' "



The willingness extends to icons who might seem beyond mortal reach, including three Englishmen honored by Her Late Majesty: Sir Paul McCartney, Sir Elton John, and Sir Rod Stewart. "We just did Rod Stewart for $1.25 million here in Las Vegas," Glenn Richardson, an event producer, told me. It was a corporate gig for Kia, the car company. "He'll do those now, because Rod's not doing as many things as in his heyday," Richardson added. A random selection of other acts who do privates (Sting, Andrea Bocelli, Jon Bon Jovi, John Mayer, Diana Ross, Maroon 5, Black Eyed Peas, OneRepublic, Katy Perry, Eric Clapton) far exceeds the list of those who are known for saying no (Bruce Springsteen, Taylor Swift, and, for reasons that nobody can quite clarify, AC/DC).

Occasionally, the music press notes a new extreme of the private market, like hits on the charts. *Billboard* reported that the Eagles received six million dollars from an unnamed client in New York for a single performance of "Hotel California," and *Rolling Stone* reported that Springsteen declined a quarter of a million to ride motorcycles with a fan. But privates typically are enveloped in secrecy, with both artists and clients demanding nondisclosure agreements and prohibitions on photos and social-media posts. Sabec told me, "They don't want anybody to know how much they paid the artist, for example, or the details of the party. And the musician might not necessarily want it to be discussed, either." (After the news of Beyoncé's fee leaked, Adam Harrison, a veteran manager, told me, "That is my nightmare." Then he reconsidered the effect on Beyoncé's operation: "It probably raises their rates.")

Until recently, the stigma extended beyond style. A prominent music executive said, "There was a phase where artists would take a private show—a cancer benefit—and somebody would find out that they're getting paid to perform, and then they look like complete cocks in the media, because they took money and some child was dying of cancer. There was risk in the money."

The risk could be especially high overseas. Before the Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi was toppled, in 2011, members of his family organized events enlivened by 50 Cent, Mariah Carey, Usher, and Nelly Furtado. During the Arab Spring, when Qaddafi unleashed his forces on protesters, Carey expressed regret, and the rest of the performers announced plans to donate their windfall to charity. That kerfuffle did not deter others, however. In 2013, Jennifer Lopez was hired by the China National Petroleum Corporation to do an event for executives in Turkmenistan, which culminated in her singing "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" to Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow—one of the world's most repressive despots. After a video of the serenade emerged, Lopez's spokesman assured fans, "Had there been knowledge of human-rights issues of any kind, Jennifer would not have attended." But the Human Rights Foundation, an advocacy group based in New York, subsequently estimated that Lopez had garnered at least ten million dollars in fees performing for "crooks and dictators from Eastern Europe and Russia." The foundation's president, Thor Halvorssen, asked, "What is the next stop on her tour, Syria?"

The opprobrium dissipated before long. In 2015, when critics urged Nicki Minaj to forsake a reported fee of two million dollars for a concert sponsored by a company linked to Angola's dictator,

she dismissed them with a tweet: "every tongue that rises up against me in judgement shall be condemned." The music executive told me that there is even a sense of commercial competition among stars, who now measure themselves as entrepreneurs. "If you're Kevin Durant, and you don't have five businesses, you're a schmuck," he said. " 'I made twenty-five million dollars playing ten birthday parties.' That used to be seen as 'You fucking piece-of-shit sellout.' Now it's 'How do I get me some of those?' "

At bottom, the boom in private gigs reflects two contrasting trends. One has to do with the music industry. For more than a century after sound was first captured on wax cylinders, in the eighteen-eighties, the money came mostly from selling recordings. But that business peaked in 1999, and, as CDs vanished, revenue sank by more than fifty per cent. It has recovered on digital subscriptions, but the new giants—Spotify, Apple, YouTube—pay artists only a fraction of what physical sales once delivered.

The other trend is the birth of a new aristocracy, which since 2000 has tripled the number of American billionaires and produced legions of the merely very rich. As musicians have faced an increasingly uncertain market, another slice of humanity has prospered: the limited partners and angel investors and ciphers of senior management who used to splurge on front-row seats at an arena show. Ruggiero, the drummer, told me, "People didn't use to do this, because they couldn't afford to have, like, the Foo Fighters come to their back yard. But now they can. They're, like, 'I can blow a hundred and fifty grand on a Thursday.' "

Ask a dozen event producers if they'd rather work with a hip young phenom or a pro in the second act of a career, and you'll hear a consistent reply. "The one you have to watch out for is the up-and-comer," Colin Cowie, an event planner in New York and Miami, told me. He aped a litany of demands: "I need this car! I need my d.j. rig to be in the middle of the room! And I need this type of room!" Willie Nelson, by contrast, is still booking privates at the age of ninety, playing a guitar so ancient that he has strummed a hole in its face.

Flo, whose real name is Tramar Dillard, is the workmanlike kind of star. The youngest of eight children, he was raised in Miami's Carol City housing projects—a shy kid who became a performer only in the seventh grade, after a teacher punished an infraction by forcing him to join the speech-and-debate team. Two years later, he became a member of the Groundhoggz, a rap group that opened for local artists, and soon he was a hype man for 2 Live Crew, the X-rated pioneers of the Miami sound known as booty bass. Flo did brief stints in college in Nevada and Florida, but he spent most of his time cold-calling studios, seeking someone who would record him. At one point, he rode a Greyhound bus to Los Angeles but was rejected by the major rap labels, and ended up sleeping in motels and, occasionally, on the street. In 2006, he signed with Poe Boy Entertainment, a hip-hop label in Miami. Within two years, he was on the charts, building a reputation as a purveyor of technically adept, if unchallenging, ladies'-man tracks about partying, spending, and vamping. An article in *Vice* once summed up his success with the headline "Flo Rida Is Boring. Flo Rida Is Perfect."

Mathis, his attorney, is a former prosecutor and corporate lawyer who joined Flo's operation in 2011, agreeing to help oversee its growing presence on the private-gig circuit. In that milieu, blandness can be a superpower. Flo can get along with "any- and everybody, from the emirs in Dubai to the thugs in Carol City," Mathis said. First, though, there were some adjustments to make. During one foray into corporate work, Flo arrived late for a Samsung event, and the C.E.O. had already left for a flight to South Korea. "It's been ten years to repair that situation," Mathis said. "For Asians, in particular, punctuality is important."

Mathis took it upon himself to help the performers make sense of the worlds they were suddenly encountering. In 2012, Flo was hired to play at a benefit for veterans alongside the Democratic National Convention. Mathis, a savvy political observer, briefed the team: "I'm, like, 'Yo, Bill Clinton is speaking tonight, and you're the entertainment for when he finishes.' " Members of Flo's entourage appeared unmoved, so Mathis laid out the stakes: "He's the guy coming to make the case for Barack Obama's reëlection, because he has a problem with working-class white men over fifty. So this is a real important night."

Over time, Flo honed a routine for private and corporate gigs. "He'll bring the C.E.O. on and have all the workers and employees and sponsors cheering," Mathis said. He'll put his sunglasses on one of the bosses. He'll shake up champagne and spray the crowd, or hand out roses, pre-positioned in the d.j. booth, for when he does "Where Them Girls At." It's all part of what Mathis calls "the formula." He told me, "The formula is definitely tried and true. It works." In all, Mathis said, Flo does at least thirty private gigs a year.

At the bar mitzvah, Flo cycled through his œuvre—"Low," "Club Can't Handle Me," "Wild Ones." He did a reliable bit where he took off his sneakers, autographed them, and handed them to Andrew, who tossed one into the crowd. For the finale, Flo, who has perhaps mellowed since the days when he and DJ Khaled dazzled clubgoers with "Bitch I'm from Dade County," shouted, "Chicago, baby!," and a shower of red confetti rained down, sticking to the kids' sweaty foreheads.

Back in his dressing room, Flo slumped into a Philippe Starck-style translucent chair, towelled off his pate, and slipped into gray rubber slides, to replace the sneakers he gave away. One-on-one, he is soft-spoken, and I wondered how he generates the gusto that the formula requires. "I've been doing this for fifteen years," he said. "I just take it like an invitation to a party. If you come out there and you don't reciprocate, then it's just a waste of everyone's time."

He takes some pleasure in managing the eccentricities of the cohort that can afford him. He recalled arriving for a gig on a megayacht in Sardinia, and finding children at play on deck. "I'm thinking I'm going to perform for all these kids," he said. Instead, he was summoned to a quiet section of the yacht and thrust in front of three adults, who were seated patiently at a round table. It was a notable departure from his experience, in 2016, of playing for eighty thousand festival-goers at Wembley Stadium. It was also, he knew, the only way he was getting off that boat with his fee. "I come for a purpose," he said. "Once I learned that,

that's where the longevity comes in."

An assistant approached with flutes of champagne. Flo waved him off and asked for a Red Bull. A moment later, the door of the dressing room swung open, and a dozen kids crowded in for the "meet and greet," as stipulated in the contract. The guests posed for photos—the boys making tough-guy faces, the girls giggling madly—while Flo projected a look of serene forbearance.

It was the look of a man who has done so many privates in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia that he says he feels like "I lived in China and Japan"—a man who has made multiple trips to Necker Island, the private getaway owned by Richard Branson. ("He gets wild onstage," Flo said.) In the dressing room, Flo asked one of his bandmates, a rapper called Oya Baby, to jog his memory about where they had stayed for the last gig there. "Guana Island," she said. "It's known for lizards everywhere. Not far from the Richard Branson island."

Both of them lingered on one incident in particular: a wedding in Beirut that started under unpleasant circumstances. "The plane had us late, and this guy was so upset," Flo said. The bride was in tears, and the groom was livid, pestering the performers while they tried to set up. "I was, like, 'Are you done? Because I'm going to the stage,'" Flo recalled. "And then, after I performed, he was so happy!" Flo was not quite so forgiving: "I was, like, 'No, don't try to hang out with me now.'"



"O.K., so 'maybe' I don't 'understand' how air quotes 'work.' "

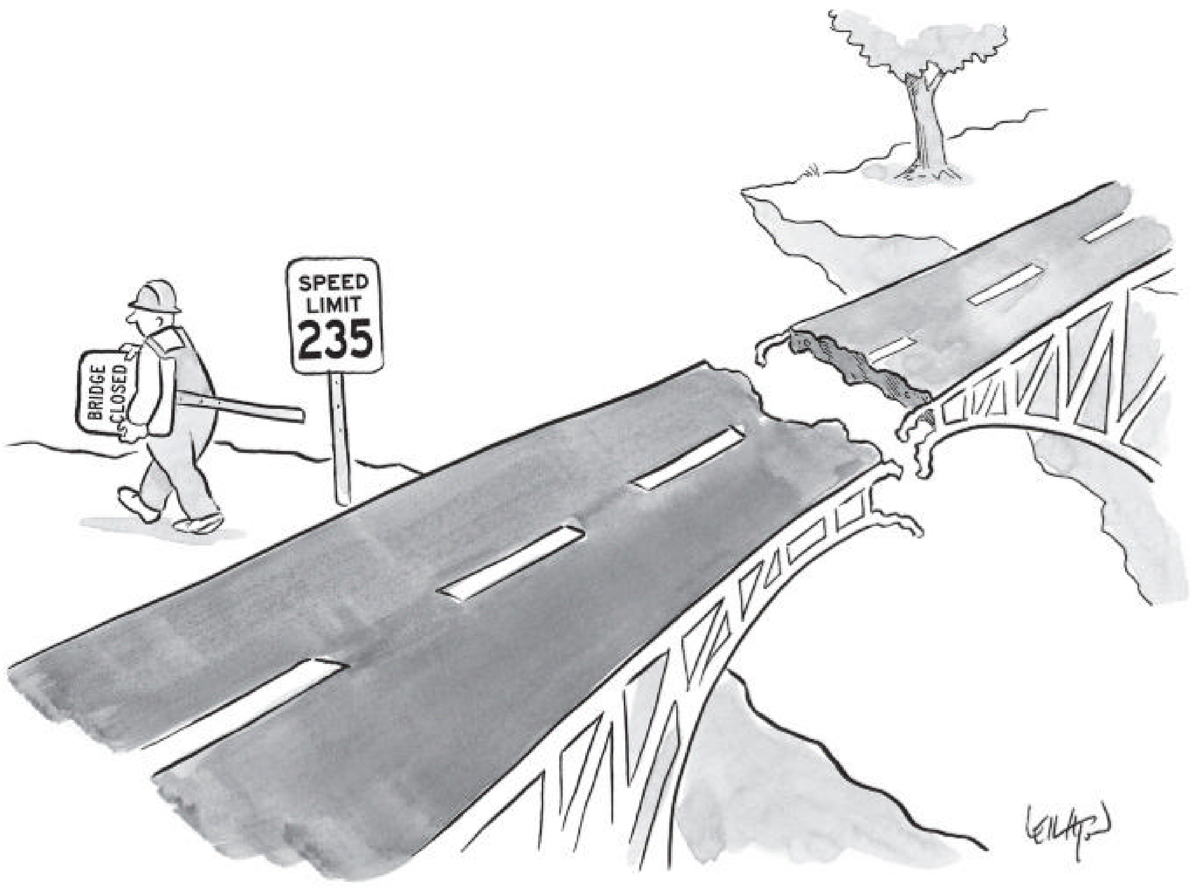
Smokey Robinson still books privates, but at the age of eighty-three he finds ways of conserving energy on the job. Glenn Richardson, the event producer, hired him not long ago, and watched Smokey engage in such protracted patter with the audience that he wondered if patter was all they were going to get. "I went over to the road manager and said, 'Is he going to sing anything?' And he goes, 'Glenn, you don't tell the vice-president of Motown Records when they need to start singing.'"

The tension between the talent and the money has a long history. In ancient Rome, wealthy music lovers had enslaved performers put on private concerts, known as *symphoniae*—even as Seneca scolded those who preferred the "sweetness of the songs" to "serious matters." Caligula liked to be serenaded aboard his yachts, and to pantomime with performers in a kind of pre-modern air guitar.

Even geniuses have had to navigate a certain servitude to their sponsors. Mozart fumed about the Archbishop of Salzburg, who "treats me like a street urchin and tells me to my face to clear out, adding that he can get hundreds to serve him better than I." But some learned to cultivate the sources of capital. In 1876, Tchaikovsky was an unhappy professor at the Moscow Conservatory when he received a letter from Nadezhda Filaretovna von Meck, the lonesome widow of a railway tycoon. Madame von Meck asked him to expand one of his pieces, which, she wrote, "drives me mad." He obliged, and before long she had put him on a salary and installed him at a villa in Florence. Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother, "N.F. asked me when to send the June remittance. Instead of replying 'Darling, for goodness' sake at once!' I played the gentleman." But the relationship soured, and the composer had to find new sources of income; he wrote glumly, "It has all turned out to be a vulgar, silly farce of which I am ashamed and sick."

In the early days of rock and roll, its stars advertised their allergy to materialism. During a press conference in 1965, Bob Dylan was asked, "If you were going to sell out to a commercial interest, which one would you choose?" Dylan's response—"Ladies' garments"—suggested that the question was absurd. In a similar spirit, the Who released an album called "The Who Sell Out," with a parody ad on the cover of Roger Daltrey selling Heinz baked beans. Bands could be shunned for any perceived transgression. In 1985, the Del Fuegos, a New England rock group favored by critics, appeared in a TV ad for Miller beer. Longtime fans revolted. Another band wrote lyrics—"I'd even drink Pepsi if you paid me enough"—mocking their commercial appearance. Warren Zanes, a guitarist in the Del Fuegos, told me, "The general position was: That's the earmark of a true sellout." Looking back, though, it seems like the first rumble of a quake along the fault line between art and commerce. "We didn't want to be fathers of that movement, but in some very small way we were," Zanes said. "Once it's the age of streaming, suddenly people weren't as pure as they thought."

The advent of Napster, in 1999, not



only reduced musicians' revenues but also scrambled the pieties surrounding art; fans who gleefully downloaded stolen music had to cede some moral high ground. In the coming years, Dylan fulfilled his prophecy and starred in a Victoria's Secret commercial, the Who licensed a song to Pepsi, and Pearl Jam, which had been so averse to consumerism that it largely refused to make music videos, promoted an album in partnerships with Target and Verizon. In 2011, after the duo Sleigh Bells had its music in a Honda commercial, one member told an interviewer, "It's almost pretentious to avoid the opportunity, especially in this climate." Rock, after all, was playing catch-up to the cultural triumph of hip-hop, which had celebrated capitalism ever since the Sugar Hill Gang rhapsodized about a Lincoln Continental, a color TV, and "more money than a sucker could ever spend."

The forthright attitude toward commerce also became visible in the private-gig market. Doug Sandler, known as DJ Doug on the mitzvah circuit around Washington, D.C., remembers the first time he was told to make room for more famous talent: "They had, as the main act, the Village People." In 2002, David Bonderman, a Texas venture capitalist, booked the Stones for his birthday, at a reported fee of seven million dollars, and word spread. Jennifer Gilbert, the founder of Save the Date, an event-planning company in New York, noticed that clients were becoming overtly competitive: "They started hearing it more and more—'Oh, they had *this* person perform.' So now someone says, 'We want something totally unique and over the top.'" Over time, the preferences showed a pattern: whoever was popular with young men about twenty-five years earlier was in renewed demand, as a rising cohort achieved private-gig-level wealth. (Current favorites include the Counting Crows and Sir Mix-a-Lot.)

In 2007, on the eve of the financial crisis, the financier Stephen Schwarzman treated himself to performances by Rod Stewart and Patti LaBelle, at a sixtieth-birthday party so lavish that it prompted what the *Times* called an "existential crisis on Wall Street about the evils of conspicuous consumption." A decade later, when Schwarzman threw a party for his seventieth—featuring not only Gwen Stefani but also trapeze artists, camels, and fireworks over Palm Beach—it barely protruded above the tide line of the Trump era.

As the market grew, there was an inherent friction between the instinct to show off and the instinct to keep quiet. In 2012, shortly before the Silicon Valley entrepreneur David Sacks sold his company Yammer for $1.2 billion, he threw a costume party for his fortieth birthday, where guests were under orders not to leak details. The embargo was broken by the hired entertainer, Snoop Dogg, who posted a photo of himself posing with the birthday boy. Sacks was wearing an eighteenth-century waistcoat, a wig, and a lacy cravat, in the mode of Marie Antoinette. The party slogan was "Let Him Eat Cake."

Musicians, on the whole, don't get into the business because they dream of playing for tiny audiences, under the shroud of an N.D.A. Hamilton Leithauser, who helped found the indie band the Walkmen before launching a solo career, recalls peering out one night into a dark club filled with "older, heavy-set Philly finance guys." He had been hired as the dinner entertainer at a business conference. "They must have spent a million dollars on the party, and they had pulled in all these huge leather couches and spread them out throughout the room." The remoteness was not only physical, he said: "The closest person is probably thirty feet away, and it's a banker eating a lobster tail."

David (Boche) Viecelli, a veteran booking agent in Chicago, has tried to help musicians navigate unfamiliar territory. Viecelli, who founded the independent agency the Billions Corporation, has represented Arcade Fire, Bon Iver, and other big acts. I asked him how musicians react when they get a private offer. "Every artist always thinks, Well, this is either going to be a total shit show or at least a drag," he said. "That goes all the way up to when you have Beyoncé going to play for some emir."

Despite all the luxuries, "corporate events can be sort of soul-destroying," Viecelli said. "It's not really an audience. It's a convention or a party, and you just happen to be making noise at one end of it." When musicians are uncertain, he has some reliable tools to help them decide: "If you can say, 'Hey, I'm going to go have a bad time for an afternoon, but it's going to pay for my kid's entire college education,' then that's a tradeoff I think most responsible adults will make." But these days he has less persuading to do. "If you talk to a twenty-year-old in the music business now, and you bring up this idea of the weirdness

of doing corporate events, they'll just stare at you, like, 'What are you talking about?' You might as well say, 'Don't you feel guilty for eating pizza?'"

The realities of making a living in music have changed radically in the past decade or two. Viecelli used to counsel emerging artists to plan for a long-term career: "It might not necessarily make you incomprehensibly rich, but it would give you a way to continue to make music the way you want, while doing it as a full-time job and being secure." In the streaming economy, audience attention is shallow and promiscuous. "A kid could know a track inside out, listen to it a thousand times that summer, and not know the artist's name. They're just surfing along the wave of whatever's getting spit out," he said. "The truth is, now young artists know they're going to have—even if they're successful—two to four years. Maybe. And so that means that they want to monetize everything as fast and hard as they can."

Given the pace of that churn, artists tend to obsess less about impressing A. & R. executives than about elbowing their way onto top-ranked playlists, with names like RapCaviar and Songs to Sing in the Car. "They know there's this giant unthinking audience that just keeps streaming these playlists and racking up those counts," Viecelli said. "Everything is geared towards treating artists essentially as disposable."

Even as streaming has diminished the returns on recording, social media has created an expectation of accessibility. Fans no longer assume that their favorite artists are remote figures. Viecelli told me, "I'll get e-mails from people saying, 'I live in Philadelphia, and I see that they're coming to town, and my daughter is a big, big fan. Could you stop off at our house to play a few songs?'" He laughed. "It's, like, 'Are you *nuts*?' But if that person says, 'And I'd be happy to pay five hundred thousand dollars for the privilege,' well, then, actually it begins to change."

In the spring of 2015, Steely Dan was hired to play a fiftieth-birthday party for Robert Downey, Jr., in a converted airplane hangar in Santa Monica. Steely Dan didn't do many privates, but Downey had endeared himself to the singer Donald Fagen. Downey, who had built a thriving late career playing Iron Man in Marvel movies, was celebrating with friends from Hollywood. "Phones were taken away. Downey came up and sang 'Reelin' in the Years' with us," Michael Leonhart, who was playing trumpet that night, recalled. When the evening's other band, Duran Duran, took the stage, Leonhart quickly realized what it meant to generate stadium campiness on a small scale: "Simon Le Bon has his back to the audience. Then he turns around, the drum machine starts, and he goes, 'Is anybody hungry—*like the wolf*? *Two, three, four!*' And I'm, like, 'Oh, my God, this guy gives good privates.'"

Leonhart, who has also played private gigs with Lenny Kravitz, learned to expect odd moments when the disparate tribes of cultural capital and financial capital meet: "Either they're in awe of your group or you're the paid servant. You're never sure which meal you're going to get, or which entrance you're going to use. When push comes to shove, it's a caste system." He conjured a controlling host: "I love what you're wearing. Can you maybe button up that shirt one more button? My great-grandmother is here." When hosts try to merge friendship and labor, though, the result can be awkward. Leonhart said, "Even if it starts off well, there's usually a fart-in-church moment, where someone is trying to be cool, as opposed to just owning it for what it is: You paid a shitload of money—enjoy it."

Over time, artists have become more willing to accept proximity. First, they embraced the meet and greet, earning



extra money on top of a concert ticket in exchange for a photo and some effortful bonhomie. (Scholars of the workplace call this "relational labor.") Privates have extended that concept by several zeros, though the underlying principle remains the same: a man who books Snoop Dogg for a private party is probably a man who would like to smoke a joint with Snoop Dogg. (Snoop avers that he has, indeed, smoked weed while working a bar mitzvah.)

In the taxonomy of paid performances, as in other parts of life, the money tends to vary inversely with dignity. Headlining a regular concert, known to professionals as a "hard ticket," pays the least; a festival, or "soft ticket," pays more, because it is usually flush with corporate sponsorship money. Privates pay the most, with the added bonus that they don't violate "radius clauses," which venues impose to stop bands from playing too many shows near one another. Thus, the modern dream scenario: take a million dollars for a holiday party on Tuesday, then play the Beacon Theatre for half that sum on Thursday night.

Ian Hendrickson-Smith is a saxophonist with the Roots, who have played privates around the world, including at Obama's sixtieth birthday on Martha's Vineyard. ("They put me in a tiny plane that was barely a plane. I was terrified," he said.) Hendrickson-Smith also releases albums under his own name, and he has watched the market change. "The largest distributor of actual physical records in the United States was fucking *Starbucks*," he said. "I used to get some nice checks. Now I put out a record and it gets streamed a ton, but my check from Spotify is, like, sixty-five cents." A 2018 report by the Music Industry Research Association found that the median musician makes less than thirty-five thousand dollars a year, including money that's not from music.

Viewed in that light, private gigs can start to feel like something close to justice. For years, Hendrickson-Smith toured with the late Sharon Jones and her band, the Dap Kings, and they often jetted overseas to play tycoons' weddings. "The second we'd hear the W-word, our price tripled immediately," he said. But he also learned that relying on private money exposed him to a new type of captivity. He once played a private party in New York where the host had hired little people, costumed as Oompa Loompas and as members of Kiss, to serve drinks. "I was mortified," Hendrickson-Smith said. "But I couldn't leave. It was brutal."

There are ways to contain the risks. Adam Harrison, who manages Chromeo, Fitz and the Tantrums, and other acts, politely reminds private clients to

limit their requests: “I’m O.K. doing a callout, but not ‘To Gary in sales, who had a great year!’ ” Moreover, Harrison said, he does not encourage his acts to put aside their values for any gig. “I’ve had bands not play Saudi Arabia privates,” he said. Another longtime manager told me that none of his acts would accept an invitation from the conservative fast-food chain Chick-fil-A, except for his one Christian band: “They don’t give a fuck. It’s right in their wheelhouse.” The ideal situation, the manager went on, is when a client is especially wedded to one act—say, the band that was playing on the Starbucks sound system at the moment that a couple met, or a pop star who seems perfectly aligned with a company’s brand identity. “When it’s a specific thing like that,” he said, “everybody smells blood.”

You don’t have to be a musician to wonder if musicians are held to an unfair standard in an era when painters unabashedly sell work to barons of insider trading, when former Presidents (and almost-Presidents) get hundreds of thousands of dollars for Wall Street speeches, and when college athletes license their likeness to the highest bidders. Call it an “evolution in the culture,” a prominent music producer told me. He apologized in advance for invoking Donald Trump, then said, “Look at who almost half the country voted for in ’16: a guy who, if you charge less than you can, because you have qualms about playing something strictly for the élite, would look at you and say, ‘Loser!’ And an amazing number of people would agree.”

“So you’re writing about the starfuckers who host these things?” Anthony Scaramucci asked, when I called him this spring. He was, in fact, describing himself, but he did not seem offended by my request for an interview. “I’m a wholesale provider of this shit,” he said. “I understand this shit.”

Long before Scaramucci became a household name for his eleven-day stint in the Trump White House, he was known as a hedge-fund manager who hosted a business conference called SALT. To attract attention to the conference, he booked private gigs by Maroon 5, Lenny Kravitz, Will.i.am, Duran Duran, the Chainsmokers, and others who might please a roomful of mostly middle-aged finance types. His conferences tap into the power of aspirational proximity; in other words, he helps well-paid shmegegges get close to their heroes.

“We’re in love with fame,” he said. “Our entire society is addicted to it.” The addiction extends to the wealthiest among us, he went on. “But let me give you the bad news for rich people: They can only go four places. They can go into the art world, or private aircraft and yachting, or charity—naming buildings and hospitals after themselves. Or they can go into experiential.” He adopted the voice of a big spender: “ ‘I’m super loaded! I have a Rolls-Royce!’ Well, fuck that. There’s ten thousand of them. But if I tell you, ‘You are one of a kind!,’ now you’re special.” As we spoke, he was stuck in midtown traffic, which occasioned a mood of patient contemplation. “You’ve got to think about it as a pyramid,” he said. “The widest part is eating at McDonald’s. The narrowest part is ‘I paid two hundred million for the Basquiat.’ Because that’s one of a kind. I’m taking a piece of the immortality that artist created, and I’m owning it. Freud said we’re ultimately hysterical because of our own demise. This is why we do these things. I have to prove that I’m really living.” He paused to let that sink in, and then returned to the voice of the big spender: “So Andrea Bocelli is going to sing at my daughter’s event.”

To turn Scaramucci’s abstractions into a gig requires a producer who can line up the money and the talent—a mix of diplomat and shrink, who specializes in what’s known as “talent buying.” Danielle Madeira, a talent buyer and producer in the San Francisco Bay Area, has come to expect that wealthy hosts will have trouble accepting the limits of their power: “I have to explain this to clients—you have agreed to make this offer, but that doesn’t mean they *accept* the offer! It’s not like you’re buying something at Target.”

J. B. Miller, the C.E.O. of Empire Entertainment, an event-production company, conducts due diligence on hosts before making an offer to a star. “I have to provide a lot of biographical material on not just the principals but who is in the room,” he told me. Miller recalls a surge of bookings during the dot-com boom. “The underlying business may or may not have ever had a possibility of making it, but, when you have artists standing up there under your logo, the world thinks, Wow, look at their stature! They must have so much money.”

There is wariness on all sides. When Miller was starting out, three decades ago, he booked Aretha Franklin for gigs



“Yes, that is the book I wrote, but it was heavily edited by a homicidal maniac.”

in Manhattan and the Hamptons, and alongside the Kentucky Derby. Franklin, like many Black artists of her generation, had grown wary of being cheated, so she demanded that her management square up in cash for every gig. "We'd sit down before the show and count it out," Miller said. He also recalled doling out cash to Ray Charles, Etta James, and James Brown. "You'd settle that, and then they'd go down to the stage."

Miller bristles at the question of whether patrons, and artists, might benefit more people by steering that money and talent to occasions that are open to the public. In San Francisco, for example, the late billionaire investor Warren Hellman endowed a free festival, Hardly Strictly Bluegrass, which draws half a million people to big-name concerts in Golden Gate Park. Miller sees no reason that the two kinds of events can't coexist. "When did music cross the Rubicon into a public service?" he asked. "You can certainly see that artist that you love when they come to a town near you. And, if you have the means, you can also have them at other times."

Peter Shapiro, a promoter who owns the Capitol Theatre and the Brooklyn Bowl, argues that this kind of spending is at least a better use of mega-wealth than other indulgences. "The privates are good for the talent, good for the venue, good for the staff," he said. "A private with great talent means hundreds of your friends can join you. They can't always join you on a yacht or in the Maldives."

On a crisp spring night on the southern tip of Manhattan, Flo Rida was backstage once more. This time, he huddled in a darkened hallway with his dancers and the d.j. and Int'l Nephew, their arms laced around one another, as they murmured a prayer. Then they lined up in a loose stack behind the door that separated them from the stage.

On the other side, in a cavernous ballroom bathed in purple light, about four hundred people with matching lanyards were celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of a private-equity firm. It was business casual, with the occasional bow tie and ball gown. A sushi buffet ran the length of one wall. The venue, Casa Cipriani, occupies a restored Beaux-Arts ferry terminal that also includes a hotel and private club, which offers suites with cashmere-lined walls, easy access to a helicopter pad, and fastidious attention to service. Guests are asked to choose which type of Italian bedding they prefer, cotton or linen.

At the lectern, two of the firm's leaders were holding forth. A gray-haired man in a gray plaid blazer praised his colleagues' delivery of "industry-leading returns for our limited partners," and thanked attendees for various feats, including "five hundred million in proceeds at a 5.5x multiple on investment capital" and enduring "awful six-hour golf rounds with me." As showtime approached, a partner in an elegant black-and-white gown told the crowd, "With pride in our hearts and sushi in our mouths, let's celebrate."

The partygoers had not been told who the headline entertainer would be, and some were quietly hoping for Springsteen. When Flo charged out from backstage, there was a brief vacuum of silence. But he plunged ahead into "Good Feeling," a thumping ode to success, with references to a Gulfstream, a Bugatti, and a Maybach. ("Talk like a winner, my chest to that sun / G5 dealer, U.S. to Taiwan.") The crowd began to fall in, and Flo showed a rowdier mode than he had at the bar mitzvah. "Who wants some shots?" he shouted, holding up bottles of vodka and tequila. There was a nervous titter; a gentleman in a bow tie craned his neck for a look, and then some of the younger guests stepped forward to drink from bottles held in Flo's outstretched hands. The mood in the room started to evolve fast.

I was permitted to attend as long as I promised not to name the firm. It was a private gig, at a private club, for a private-equity firm—an entire arena of American commerce defined by self-conscious exclusivity. I'll call the firm Equity Partners. As the night wore on, Flo developed a call-and-response with the crowd. He'd shout, "What happens at Equity Partners—" and they'd shout back, "Stays at Equity Partners!"

By the time Flo was rhapsodizing about the pole dancer in "Right Round," the formula was in full effect: Flo put his sunglasses on an executive, and the crowd howled, while the man lurched around in awkward ecstasy. When the performers got to "Where Them Girls At," Flo grabbed the roses from the d.j. booth and doled them out to giddy recipients. He peeled off his vest and stalked the stage, his naked torso showing tattoos of Ray Charles, James Brown, and Sammy Davis, Jr. Before long, there were so many men and women clambering up onstage that the dancers, in their mesh leggings and bikini tops, had to fight to be seen. Flo kept pouring from a bottle of Grey Goose, and people in the crowd kept approaching to tip their heads back, blazers thrown open, lanyards askew.

It was hard to tell which side—Flo or the investors—was more amused by the scene of communion between distant cousins in the family of wealth. When the show was over, the junior analysts staggered off in pairs, while the middle managers hustled to Metro-North. Flo returned to his dressing room, which was bustling with assistants, hangers-on, and aspiring friends. The performers were swapping tales from the night—of "the elderly woman in the front," at stage right, who went bananas during "Wild Ones." "She got her groove back in that exact moment," Oya Baby said. "She was, like, '*Me*? *I'm wild!*' "

It wasn't all that different from Flo's big years; it's just that the audience was smaller and the fee larger. Seven years after his last Top Ten hit, the crowds still get loopy when they hear a song from their high-school prom, and some of the erstwhile club kids are now entering middle management, with the power to book the entertainment for the holiday party.

Carts of food arrived—truffle fries, grilled fish, champagne—but Flo was nursing a bottle of Pedialyte, the rehydration secret for middle-aged stardom. The next morning, he was flying off to St. Louis, followed by Miami, Vegas, Arizona, Minnesota, and Vegas again. I wondered how long he planned to keep up his pace. "The thing is, people love to feel loved," he said. "So it doesn't matter if you're doing this gig or that gig. It never gets old." He turned to the side, to oblige one of the event planners with a selfie. The first time we met, he had confessed to the addictive pleasure, as ancient as Caligula, of watching people watch you. And, of course, there was the motivating question that would be familiar to his private audiences: "How much money is enough money?" ♦

PROFILES

POP UP

Kim Petras has dreamed of superstardom since she was a teen-ager. Has her moment arrived?

BY KELEFA SANNEH

Most people who listen to popular music don't spend much time reading the credits. So producers who want to make sure their work is recognized occasionally mark their creations with what's known as a producer tag—an audible watermark near the beginning of the track. Metro Boomin, one of the dominant hip-hop producers of the twenty-tens, sometimes used a sample of the rapper Future, one of his clients, saying, "If young Metro don't trust you, I'm gon' shoot you." Take a Daytrip, a duo behind many of Lil Nas X's biggest hits, had a more celebratory tag: "Daytrip took it to ten!" A few years ago, a pop-obsessed German immigrant named Kim Petras decided that she needed a producer tag of her own, as part of her plan to achieve musical ubiquity. Petras is not, in fact, a producer but a songwriter and a singer. The tag she created was, like her music, enthusiastic and more than a little absurd: "Woo Ah!" The "Woo" is high, like a siren; the "Ah!" is breathy, like a sigh.

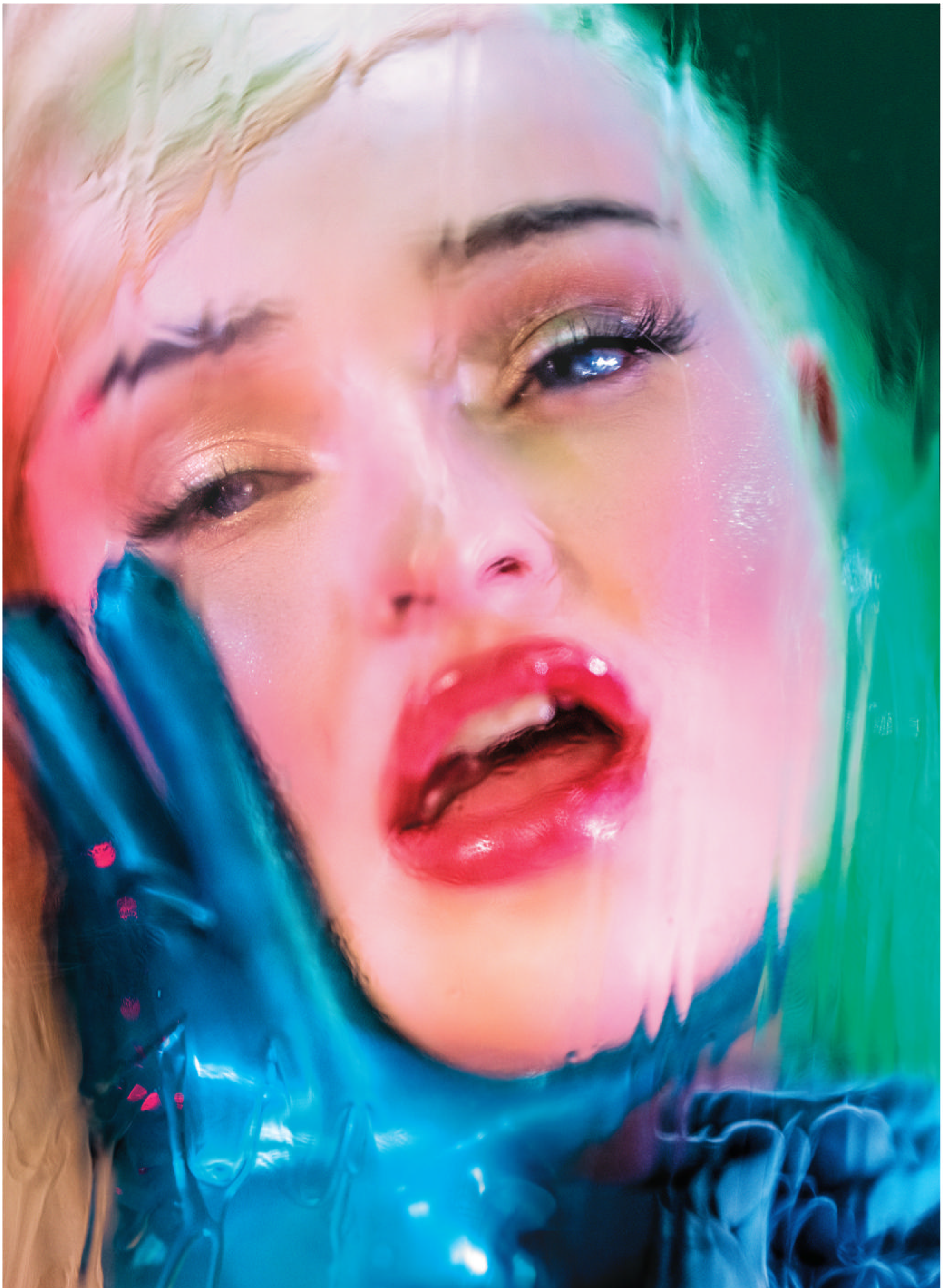
In short order, "Woo Ah" took over the world. Or, at any rate, the Kim Petras world, which was a bit smaller and a lot more vivid than the one most people lived in. Her fans called themselves Bunheads, for the off-center coil that Petras wore in her hair, and they treated Petras like the pop star she wanted to be. On Twitter, some of them celebrated #InternationalWooAhDay on August 1st, which was the anniversary of the day, in 2017, that she released her first single, "I Don't Want It at All." In 2019, fans sold out Petras's show in New York, at Irving Plaza, which holds about a thousand people. It was a warm night in June, Pride Month, and the audience of Bunheads, largely male and gay, was happy to take direction. Before the music started, a robotic prerecorded voice came through the speakers. "When I say 'Woo,' you say, 'Ah,'" it intoned. "Failure to comply will be grounds for immediate ejection from the premises."

Moments later, Petras emerged, wearing wraparound sunglasses and an oversized sports coat, neither of which lasted long. Her show compressed big-room energy into a medium-sized room. There were two costume changes, dozens of photogenic poses, and hardly any lyrics that the crowd didn't sing back to the stage, twice as loud. Introducing "I Don't Want It at All," Petras called it "the song that cemented my place as a brand-new pop queen." It is perfectly pop, an ode to expensive clothes (and, by extension, to the kind of man who might buy them as a gift), with a pastel video starring Petras's friend Paris Hilton as her fairy godmother. But the song had remained an underground favorite, not a radio hit. On that night, it was not clear whether Petras would ever become a real star—although it was clear that, in a different sense, she already was one. On the way out of the club, you could buy a "Woo Ah!" baseball cap, secure in the knowledge that people who saw it generally wouldn't know what it meant. (I did, and they didn't.)

These days, Petras's quest for ubiquity is a lot closer to its goal. Last year, she collaborated with the English pop star Sam Smith on a song called "Unholy," which went to the top of the pop chart, becoming one of those songs which you hear whether you want to or not. On "Saturday Night Live," Smith sang it dressed in a voluminous pink tulle gown—voluminous enough, in fact, to conceal Petras. After the chorus, she suddenly emerged from between Smith's legs to sing her verse, in which she slips into character as a rich man's bratty sugar baby: "Mm, daddy, daddy, if you want it, drop the addy / Give me love, give me Fendi, my Balenciaga daddy." (Petras has declined to clarify whether "addy" means "address" or "Adderall," but it probably does not mean "attitude"—in her songs, nobody ever seems to drop the attitude.) In February, at the Grammy Awards, Smith and Petras were introduced by Madonna, and performed a version of "Unholy" that seemed to be set in a satanic night club: fire, cages, red leather. Even better, Smokey Robinson presented them with a Grammy for Best Pop Duo/Group Performance, and Petras began her acceptance speech by mentioning something that some of her listeners already knew, although maybe not all of them. "I am the first transgender woman to win this award," she said, and the cameras caught Taylor Swift, among others, standing and applauding.

"I don't think I would have been able to handle the whole 'Unholy' thing without having been in the industry for years," Petras told me, the following month. It was a gray morning in New York, and she was sitting in an apartment that belonged to her publicist, sipping Veuve Clicquot in honor of someone on her team, who was celebrating a birthday. She was dressed casually, but not carelessly, in wide-legged stonewashed jeans and Lanvin skateboard sneakers, and she seemed unfazed by the fact that her Grammy performance had not been met with universal acclaim. Senator Ted Cruz had retweeted a clip of it, with the verdict: "This . . . is . . . evil."

For someone in Petras's line of work, the judgment of a Republican senator is generally less consequential than the judgment of that heterogeneous mass of people who constitute the audience for pop music, and whose tastes can be hard to predict, even for someone as well versed in pop history as Petras is. "I'm one of the biggest pop studiers," she told me, suddenly sounding more like a German fan than like an American star. (She claims to have learned English by watching Britney Spears



Petras finds ways to "stupefy" her songs. "The funnest parts to shout along with in the club are the stupid parts," she says.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARILYN MINTER

interviews on YouTube.) Petras was preparing to release a single called "Alone," which is a kind of pop-history project: it is built atop the beeping beat of "Better Off Alone," the 1999 global hit by Alice Deejay, a Dutch group. To turn the song into an event, Petras had recruited Nicki Minaj, who gave her not only a guest verse but a new nickname: Kim Petty. Petras said, "All my friends and me were, like, 'How the fuck didn't *we* come up with that?'"

On June 23rd, Petras will release her major-label début album, "Feed the Beast," on Republic Records; it was named for advice given to her by a label executive, who kept urging her to make more music for the company to sell. For Petras, the all-consuming nature of the music industry is part of the fun. Being truly pop means being widely palatable, and it also means risking public rejection. "It's like when the gorgeous girl gets fed to the beast—but the beast doesn't want to eat her," she told me. "What will make you want to eat me?"

Petras once described herself as having "crazy nonsensical confidence," which seems as good an explanation as any for how she got from the German suburb of Uckerath, outside Cologne, to the Grammy stage. She was born in 1992, and says that she knew from a young age that she was a girl. At the age of twelve, she persuaded her parents to help her find the right doctor and began medical treatment. In the years that followed, she found community in the gay clubs of Cologne. She says that she also knew, with similar conviction, that she was a pop star. While in high school, she talked her way into a local music studio and eventually earned a songwriting contract with Universal Germany. She attained musical success, of a sort, composing advertising jingles. In her spare time, she sang covers on YouTube, and at nineteen she went to Los Angeles, with not much besides a plan to connect with some music people she had met online. Stories like this typically end in disappointment, or worse, but Petras had a canny approach: instead of selling herself to executives as a potential star, she sold herself to songwriters and producers as a fellow music nerd. She soon met Aaron Joseph, who had a small publishing deal with Prescription Songs, the company formed by Lukasz Gottwald, the hit-making impresario known as Dr. Luke. Joseph should probably have been developing a catalogue of songs that he could pitch to established stars, but instead he found himself helping Petras write material that fit both her campy sensibility and her voice, which is loud and raucous, like a record on the verge of distorting.

Pop music, broadly defined, includes just about any song that lots of people love. But there is also a narrower definition of pop, one that cohered in the nineteen-eighties, and that may still evoke the eighties today: bright melodies, synthesizers, club-inspired rhythms, outrageous fashion, a hint of mischief. In short, Madonna, and anyone who even slightly resembles her. Music might be recognizably "pop," in this sense, even if it's not actually popular. Joseph and Petras shared an intense interest in pop music, including more marginal acts like Baltimora, the Italian group behind the 1985 hit "Tarzan Boy." Alex Chapman, a producer and d.j. who is known for headlining high-profile gay parties, met Petras a few years later, and was for a time her roommate. He, too, was struck by her enthusiasm for pop arcana. "We love a trashy pop moment," Chapman says.

By the time Petras and Joseph started building a résumé, in the mid-twenty-tens, pop stars like Katy Perry and Lady Gaga were no longer so dominant, and the songs on the radio were growing slower and moodier, under the influence of hip-hop and R. and B. In that context, Petras's brash, upbeat sound seemed either behind the times or ahead of them. Petras remembers wondering, "Why do I have to want to make girly, gay pop music when no one's listening to it—why is that my gift?" In 2015, she and Joseph travelled to New York to perform for the C.E.O. of Epic Records. It was Petras's first time in New York, and they had no money for a cab; they arrived at the record company frazzled, played a few songs for the gathered executives, and flew back to California, with no clear idea what to do next. Eventually, Petras signed a contract—not with a major record company but with Gottwald, who had taken an interest in his protégé's protégé. Gottwald became Petras's constant collaborator, helping to write, produce, and release her songs, sometimes under a pseudonym; her major-label début is being issued by Republic through Gottwald's imprint, Amigo Records.

Gottwald helped create the sound of twenty-first-century pop, co-writing candy-sweet hits like Kelly Clarkson's "Since U Been Gone," Perry's "I Kissed a Girl," Miley Cyrus's "Party in the U.S.A.," and Doja Cat's "Say So." He is also notorious, because of allegations made by Kesha, a former client, who says that he drugged and sexually assaulted her. Gottwald denied having ever had sexual contact with



Kesha, and in 2016 a judge dismissed her legal claims; Gottwald has accused Kesha of defamation, and the trial is scheduled to begin this summer. At times, Petras's professional association with Gottwald has been a liability, and in a 2018 interview with NME, the British music site, she seemed to defend him, saying, "I would like my fans to know that I wouldn't work with somebody I believe to be an abuser of women, definitely not." A few months later, she made a more conciliatory—or maybe more lawyerly—statement on Twitter. "While I've been open and honest about my positive experience with Dr. Luke, that does not negate or dismiss the experience of others or suggest that multiple perspectives cannot exist at once," she wrote. "I didn't communicate this clearly in the past." Petras no longer talks about Gottwald in interviews; perhaps she calculates that people who think it's unconscionable to work with him aren't likely to be persuaded otherwise.

Thanks in part to the success of "Unholy," Petras can now work with just about any songwriter she likes, which explains how she found herself, one day in April, in a Hollywood music studio, participating in the kind of all-star writing session that she once dreamed of. The biggest name was David Guetta, the French producer and d.j., who helped teach Americans to love the kind of euphoric dance music that has long been popular in Europe; his résumé includes "I Gotta Feeling," by the Black Eyed Peas, and "Titanium," featuring Sia. Sarah Hudson was there, too (Katy Perry, "Dark Horse"; Dua Lipa, "Levitating"), as well as Rami Yacoub, a Swede who has worked on an astonishing list of hits stretching back to Britney Spears's ". . . Baby One More Time," which still sounds, nearly a quarter century later, like just about the most devastating pop song ever loosed upon the world. Petras was excited, or maybe just nervous. "I'm pacing," she said, to the room. "I've always been a pacing kinda bitch."

Guetta had an idea: he thought Petras might want to write something based on "Sans Contrefaçon," a 1987 hit by Mylène Farmer, a French pop star. He cued it up. "It's like ABBA," Petras said, approvingly.

Guetta went online to find a translation of the lyrics. The title might be rendered, rather awkwardly, as "Without Counterfeit"—or, with some poetic license, as "Honestly." The song revolves around a confession: roughly, "Since we have to choose, I'll say it softly/I'm a boy, honestly." The lyrics are evocative and enigmatic, with a stray reference to the Chevalier d'Éon, an eighteenth-century diplomat and spy who went undercover as a woman and lived that way for more than thirty years. "'Alone in my closet,'" Guetta said, reading the translation. "That line is so crazy!"



Petras was curious, but not quite ready to dive in. "Why don't we warm up with one of the funner ones?" she said, referring to some of the more upbeat song ideas. Soon she and Hudson were improvising lyrics about lust and destiny. "I love the concept of 'I'm your fate,'" Petras said. "'Is this meant to be, or we're just meant to fuck?'" She had an idea. "Can I go just freestyle some shit?" she said, and slipped into the recording booth to try out phrases, the way a guitarist might try out riffs. "Automobiles and diamond rings," she sang. "Let me *beee*," she added, pushing the last word up the scale. "'Cause I don't really care!"

This last phrase was the one that resonated, and soon the pop scientists were trying to create something around it. Petras is known for her vocal range, and for her maximalist approach to songcraft. Shortly after she moved to California, she booked some songwriting sessions with the pop star JoJo, who remembers marvelling at her musical curiosity. "She was like an elastic band," JoJo recalls. "She would just keep stretching herself and trying new ideas." These days, Petras's songs tend to be concise but dense: "Malibu," a 2020 single that channels Michael Jackson, has a stop, a start, and a key change shortly before the two-minute mark; instead of adding a bridge, after the second verse, Petras might instead "fuck with the second-verse melody," to add variation without sacrificing brevity. Still, she is aware that a great pop song probably shouldn't sound too virtuosic. "I think the interesting part of pop is 'Where do you stupefy it?'" she says. "Because the funnest parts to shout along with in the club are the stupid parts." Petras has written countless song lyrics through the years, but the one that really changed her life was the one that began, "Mm, daddy, daddy."

When Petras pulled into another music studio, the next day, she was wearing the same black Balenciaga basketball shorts she had been wearing the day before. "I slept in this," she said. "I'm disgusting." She lives in Beachwood Canyon with her three dogs, and she had spent the night thinking about "Sans Contrefaçon." She and the other writers had eventually managed to transform it into a new song—not quite a cover, or a remix, but something that retained both the beat and the concept. "I was up till 3 A.M., listening to a shitty voice memo and trying to come up with verse two," she said. (For someone with easy access to top-quality audio equipment, she spends a lot of time listening to rough mixes, rerecorded through an iPhone.) "It's about this girl who says, 'If I had a choice, I would be a boy'—so we kinda flipped that whole shit," she told me. "I've never made a trans-related-subject song."

Petras's long and willful journey toward celebrity began, in a sense, with a journey away from it. As a teen-ager, she gave interviews and wrote blog posts about her transition, and was featured in documentaries and articles. "Every single one was called, like, 'From Boy to Girl,' 'From Tim to Kim,'" she says. "I was kind of, like, a joke in Germany, a little bit." In 2009, when she was sixteen, the *Daily Mail* called her "the world's youngest transsexual," and quoted her doctor, who said, "To the best of my knowledge, Kim is the youngest sex-change patient in the world." A few years later, she sat for an ABC News interview with Cynthia McFadden, who described her as both a pioneer and an aspiring pop singer. "It might seem hard, but still so plain to see/This is the real me," she sang; the earnest lyrics seemed straightforwardly autobiographical.

In general, Petras didn't tell executives she met in her early years that she was

trans, although she knew that they would discover her story when they Googled her. "We weren't hiding it, but we weren't leading with it," Joseph recalls. Instead of singing about living her truth, Petras drew inspiration from the gay night clubs in Cologne, and from the kind of intense but campy pop that thrives in these clubs. Ty Sunderland, an event producer and d.j. who helped popularize Petras in New York's gay club scene, discovered her on Spotify, without knowing anything about her, and was immediately smitten. "Gay people love divas, we love women, we love drag queens," he said. "These larger-than-life female personalities." Petras found that it was liberating to be able to be herself without revealing herself. "I don't want to talk about my life stories, because it's too personal," she told me. "So I love making up characters."

In the past six years, part of the fun of being a Petras fan has been following along as she tries on different styles and moods. Bunheads sometimes talk about her "neon" era, referring to a batch of peppy, infernally catchy songs that were released as stand-alone singles, with neon covers, beginning in 2017. There was a two-part collection called "Turn Off the Light," with punishingly hard beats and playfully monstrous lyrics, inspired by her favorite horror movies. "Coconuts," a fan-favorite single, turns out not to be about tropical fruit. And last year Petras released "Slut Pop," which included a track called "Throat Goat," an ode both to oral sex and to Petras's fluttery, throaty vibrato—which can sound, as many people have told her, distinctly caprine. "Clarity," her 2019 independent album, is viewed by fans as a classic: thirty-eight minutes of vivid melodies, by turns silly and severe. Or, to quote a piece of fan fiction written by @thatswiftbitch, one of the most exuberant Bunheads on Twitter, "Kim walked into that studio, did 5 lines of coke, texted Aaron Joseph 'lol come on queer,' put her CLIT directly on the mic for 2 hours and hit record. 12/10."

At times, some of the people who want to support her haven't known quite what to make of all these poses and reinventions. In 2018, Pitchfork published an op-ed scrutinizing Petras's "carefree, upbeat, and markedly apolitical vibe," and suggesting that she might better serve trans fans by "speaking out on behalf of trans issues." Petras seems to have grown increasingly careful about how she talks about trans identity, perhaps aware that one stray quote might be enough to drown out the music she works so hard on. In 2018, talking to *Gay Times* about kids seeking gender-related surgery, she said, "I think the earlier the better." But during a recent radio interview in which a fan asked whether she thought fourteen was too young for a medical transition, she emphasized the importance of professional medical advice. At other times, she relies upon irony and attitude, qualities that have generally served her well. In 2021, on TikTok, she posted a video of herself in a pool, enjoying the California sunshine while delivering a vocal-fried mission statement. "When I wake up in the morning, I do something really transgender, and then I make my trans breakfast, and then I shake my tits super transgenderly, all day, to 'Coconuts,'" she said. "Yay! I'm so *traaans!*"

It is inevitable that Petras's professional successes will also be viewed as trans milestones. Earlier this year, she was photographed for the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue, and during a recent visit to Republic's offices she was told, via Zoom, that she had made the cover. "This is, like, actually insane," she said. "That means so much to little kids like me out there." Monte Lipman, the C.E.O. of Republic, stopped by, and she told him the news. "Oh, my God," he said. "When I was like twelve, the cover with Cheryl Tiegs—I actually still have that somewhere. So people are going to collect this thing forever."

No one knew, though, what the reaction would be. Not long before, the trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney had posted a bit of sponsored content for Bud Light, leading to a backlash so severe that it depressed sales of the brand for months, and damaged the company's stock price. As it happened, the revelation of Petras's place on the cover was overshadowed by the image of one of her fellow cover models, Martha Stewart, who is eighty-one, and seemed to earn universal acclaim and envy. Even so, Megyn Kelly, the former Fox News and NBC News host, reacted by asking, on Australian television, "Why do we have to have a biological man, now, in a woman's bathing suit, parading around on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*?" Petras grew up with a strong desire to be normal, coupled with a strong desire to be extraordinary, and her life, like the music she makes, is proof that those two desires aren't necessarily incompatible. "I definitely wanted to fit in," she said, remembering her teen-age years. "But it's strange, because, like, what is the role of a trans pop singer?"

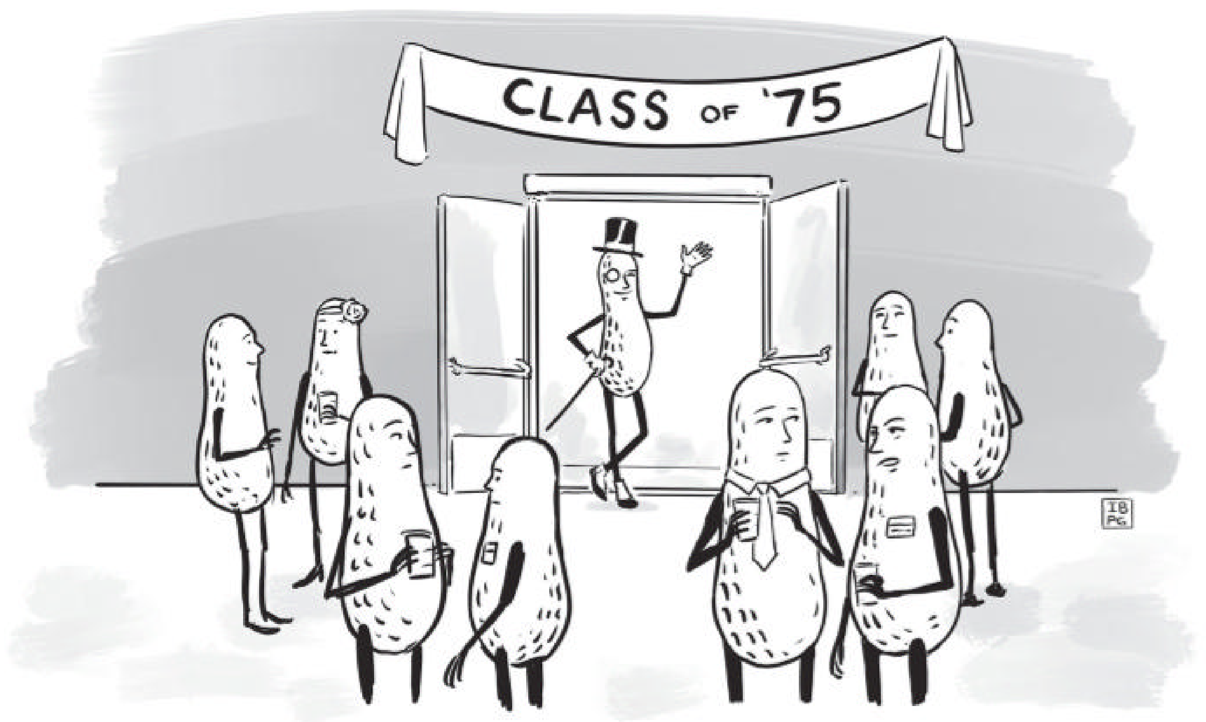
One of the people helping Petras navigate her growing celebrity is her manager, Larry Rudolph, whose previous clients include Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus. He has been working with Petras since 2017, and in some ways his job has grown easier. "I used to have to explain who this girl is," he told me. "Now I don't have to explain anymore." But some longtime fans have mixed feelings about Petras's emergence from the underground. One Bunhead, @seanbeegee, posted a response to "Unholy" on Twitter:

> Kim Petras has such an inspiring story . . . releasing some of the highest quality pop songs in the world for about three years to the warm approval of me and 7 other gay guys . . . then becoming a world famous trailblazer for the worst song ever made.

Sunderland, the New York d.j., admits that "Unholy" became so played-out that he had to take it off his set lists for a while. "It had a moment when it was on the radio, all over TikTok, and you couldn't escape," he says. But the prohibition is now over. "The gay cycle of things," he said. "First it's tacky, now it's camp."

All musical communities have their pathologies, but there is something singular about the world of pop music, perhaps because of the width of the gap between the inspirational lyrics of the songs and the vicious judgments and rivalries of the fans. It is not enough for your fave to scale the pop chart; everyone else's faves must also flop. Flopping is, in fact, essential to pop music. While a semi-popular singer-songwriter or a legendary techno d.j. can float along indefinitely in a haze of mild approval, a proper pop star must release a series of hits, which can't hit unless just about everybody else's would-be hits miss. Petras spent months teasing "Alone," her Nicki Minaj collaboration, on TikTok, making sure that fans knew the beat

and the hook before the song dropped, and encouraging them to "pre-save" it, so that streaming services would register a burst of interest when the song was released. It's a well-made confection, though perhaps not as singular or as unhinged as Petras at her best. (You can almost imagine someone else singing it, which isn't something that would ever be said of "Throat Goat.") The song made its début at No. 55 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart, and has not yet become the kind of pop juggernaut that makes underground d.j.s flee in terror. Fans of rival stars gathered online to celebrate. Rudolph doesn't pretend that Petras isn't under pressure to deliver more hits. "Pop doesn't really live underground—it either comes above ground or it doesn't work," he told me. "It doesn't have to work tomorrow. It just has to work within a reasonable progression of time."



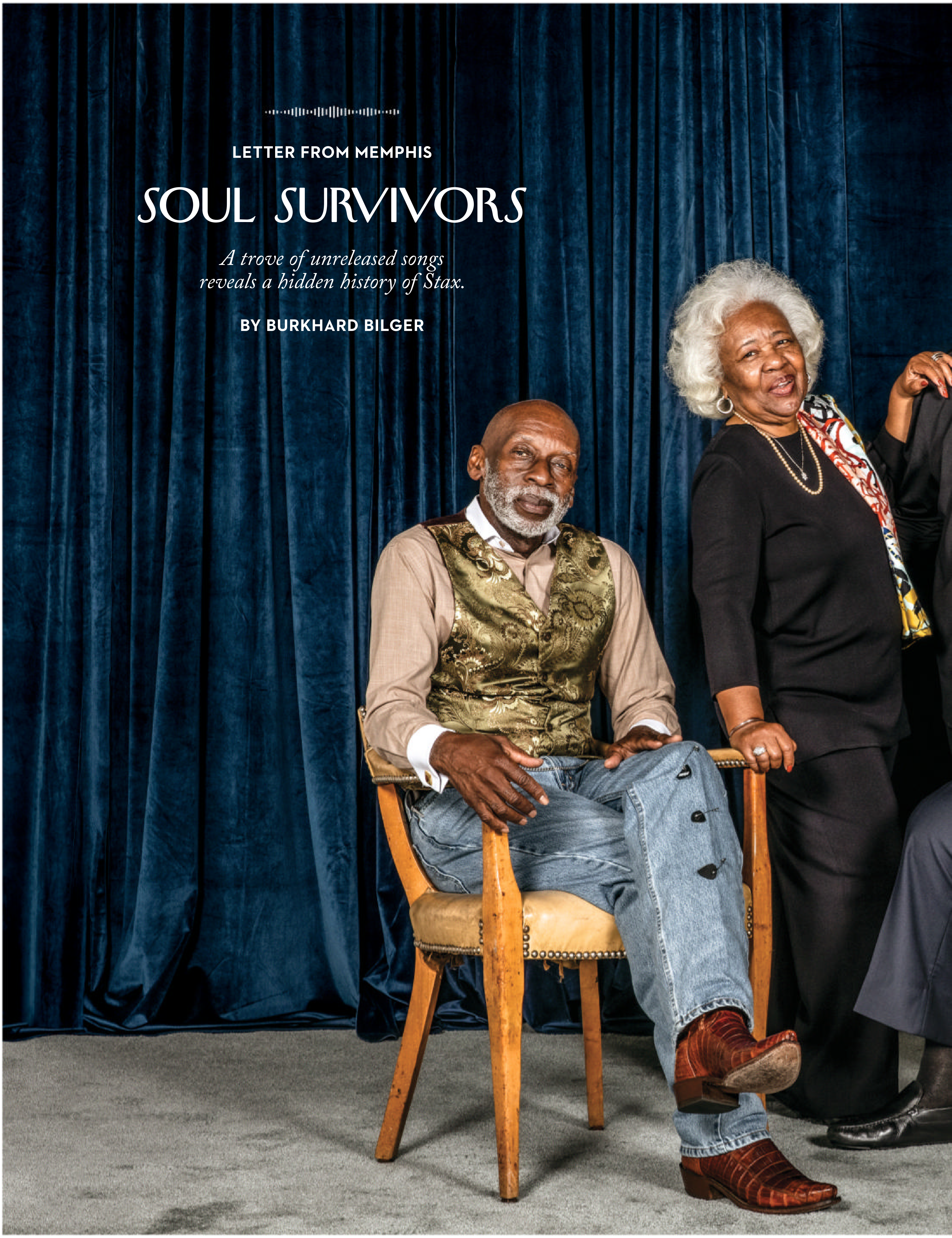
"Don't look now, but Mr. Big Shot showed up."

When Sunderland first heard Petras's music, in 2017, he was convinced that if he didn't meet her soon she would become too famous for him. Six years later, some of her fans pine for the old days. "Feed the Beast" is actually her second major-label début; the first was "Problématique," most of which was leaked online last summer, prompting her label to cancel its release. (Fans, naturally, created their own track lists and album art, and doubtless some of them especially loved the album because it didn't officially exist.) Perhaps even more than that album, "Feed the Beast" leans into the alien sound of European dance music: the German upbringing that once made Petras seem an unlikely American success story is now part of her competitive advantage. One song on the album, an ode to unchecked hedonism called "Castle in the Sky," was inspired by unpretentious German dance acts of the past, like Scooter and Blümchen; it rattles along at nearly a hundred and seventy beats per minute, which is much too fast to dance if you're trying to look cool. "I feel like people are scared of that tempo," Petras told me. "But I grew up wanting to be a raver." Another new song, "Claws," is built around a sample of a German yodel; it has already become a fan favorite, based on a snippet that Petras shared on an Instagram Live stream. This is Petras's main objective during the next few weeks: making sure that her fans are as hungry as possible.

The tricky thing about pop music, though, is that it's never just about the music. Part of Petras's job is to be Kim Petras, which explains why, even as she was rushing to finish her album, she flew to New York this spring, for the Met Gala. When she attended in 2021, she had been dressed by the prankish designer Hillary Taymour, from Collina Strada, who put her in a bright-orange chest plate shaped into a startlingly realistic horse's head—a "horset," Taymour called it—with a matching floor-length orange braided ponytail. This year, Petras was dressed by Marc Jacobs, who put her in a complicated off-white-and-black outfit that made her look like a hastily wrapped Christmas present, complete with sequinned platform boots. "The shoes are actually the big star of the whole outfit," Petras said, to a camera crew from *German Vogue*, as she got ready. To many people watching at home, the real star was, in fact, the small yellow vape pen that she was furtively clutching on the steps of the Met Gala.

While Petras was in town, she took the opportunity to do some press, including an appearance on "Elvis Duran and the Morning Show," a radio broadcast recorded in midtown. Petras filled a greenroom with her travelling entourage, among them a hair stylist, a makeup artist, a videographer, a creative director, and various emissaries from her label and her management company. On the air, she talked to Duran about the Met Gala, her busy schedule, the success of "Unholy," and her determination to persevere in the face of "backlash"; she also sat through a dramatic reading of some of the lyrics to "Throat Goat." ("My finest work," she said, when it was over.) Afterward, the entire crew piled into a Sprinter van to head downtown to Petras's hotel, stopping briefly on the sidewalk outside for an impromptu photo shoot; she was wearing a matching lilac top and miniskirt, spangled and feathered, that deserved to be commemorated. As she struck a variety of poses, two Black women in a Ford Fiesta shouted an approving "Yes, honey!" It wasn't clear whether they recognized her or just liked her style.

In the van, Petras had been trying to figure out the rest of her day: she needed to pack for the flight back to Los Angeles, where she would be attending a Chanel fashion show, and she needed to finalize the list of thank-yous for her album. She seemed tired, but she perked up when a member of her entourage announced that she had some breaking news: a friend was reporting that "Alone" had made it onto the playlist at her Pilates class. Petras chuckled. "Straight girls are getting into it," she said. Faint praise, maybe. But maybe also a good sign. ♦



LETTER FROM MEMPHIS

SOUL SURVIVORS

A trove of unreleased songs reveals a hidden history of Stax.

BY BURKHARD BILGER

Henderson Thigpen, Deanie Parker, Bobby Manuel, and Eddie Floyd, photographed this year, were among the songwriters who



helped create the sound of the legendary label in the nineteen-sixties and seventies.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEFAN RUIZ

It wasn't the singing; it was the song. When Deanie Parker hit her last high note in the studio, and the band's final chord faded behind her, the producer gave her a long, appraising look. She'd be great onstage, with those sugarplum features and defiant eyes, and that voice could knock down walls. "You sound good," he said. "But if we're going to cut a record, you've got to have your own song. A song that you created. We can't introduce a new artist covering somebody else's song." Did she have any original material? Parker stared at him blankly for a moment, then shook her head.

No. But she could get some.

Parker was seventeen. She had moved to Memphis a year earlier, in 1961, to live with her mother and stepfather, and was itching to get out of school and start performing. She was born in Mississippi but had spent most of her childhood with her aunt and uncle in Ironton, Ohio, a small town on the Kentucky border. Her grandfather had sent her there after her parents divorced, hoping that she could get a better education up north. Her aunt Velma was a church secretary and a part-time college student; her uncle James worked for the C. & O. Railway. They gave her piano lessons at a Catholic convent and elocution lessons at home. On Sunday afternoons, her aunt would take her to church teas and teach her proper etiquette—how to fold her white gloves in her purse and set her napkin on her lap. In Ironton, the races were allowed to mix a little. Churches and most social clubs were segregated, but Parker went to school with white kids and sometimes even played in their homes. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that there was no difference between them.

Not in Memphis. Memphis never let you forget your place. It was the capital of the Mississippi Delta, the home of the Cotton Exchange, where plantation owners once made their wealth. Whites lived downtown and in the better houses to the east; Blacks were in the poor and working-class neighborhoods to the north and south, corralled there by redlining. Schools, bars, restaurants, buses, libraries, rest rooms, and telephone booths all had their shabbier counterparts across town,

their shadow selves. (When the city parks were finally desegregated, in 1963, the public pools shut down rather than let Black people in the water.) Even Beale Street and its blues clubs kept to one side of the line: the street ran along the southern edge of downtown, where whites could step into a club without walking through a Black neighborhood—or having Black musicians walk through theirs. "Every single thing was segregated, from cradle to grave," a local civil-rights leader later recalled. "I never really understood why the graveyards had to be segregated, because the dead get along with each other pretty well."

On her first day at Hamilton High School, Parker wore her favorite outfit: a pleated floral skirt with a sleeveless, orange-and-fuchsia top—perfectly matched, as her aunt Velma had taught her. She might as well have had on a ballroom gown. Everywhere she went, the kids snickered and stared. Most of them were dressed in hand-me-downs or castoffs from their parents' white employers. Who did she think she was? To survive in this two-sided city, she realized, she would have to vary her behavior to match. It didn't take her long. "I think it's in the DNA," she says. "Or like this old Black lady once told me, 'It's in the Dana.'"

Singing was her secret strength. She'd been doing it since she was five years old, in the sunbeams choir at her African Methodist Episcopal church. She could read music and outline harmonies and knew most of the Wesleyan Methodist hymnal by heart. In Ironton, all you could get on the radio was country music. She lived for the moment every night, at nine o'clock, when she could catch a signal out of Nashville—WLAC playing "I Don't Want to Cry," by Chuck Jackson, or some other rhythm-and-blues hit. "I knew what I liked to listen to and the music that moved me," she says. "I didn't have that, and I wanted it so badly."

In Memphis, it was everywhere. The city was both a foreign country and her heart's home. By five in the morning, her grandparents were tuned in to Theo (Bless My Bones) Wade, who played spirituals on WDIA radio. Then A. C. (Moohah) Williams or Martha Jean Steinberg would come on with doo-wop and R. & B. and handy tips for homemakers, or Nat D. Williams, the city's first Black disk jockey, would play some B. B. King or Nat King Cole. The station's fifty-thousand-watt transmitter could blast over any color line. "I cut my teeth on that music," Parker says. "I learned harmony and timing through the disciplined music of the church. But what I wanted to do was not about that. It was about 'Let it go and let it flow.'"

Her glee-club director must have heard it in her voice. Memphis schools had long been feeders to the record industry, and the teachers knew how to foster talent. The city's first high-school band director, Jimmie Lunceford, took his students to Harlem after they graduated, and they became the house band at the Cotton Club in 1934. By the time Parker arrived, WDIA had a rotating cast of rising stars called the Teen Town Singers. Isaac Hayes was at Manassas High, the Bar-Kays were at Booker T. Washington, and Carla Thomas, the Queen of Memphis Soul, was at Hamilton with Parker. One day after class, the glee-club director pulled Parker aside. She'd heard her sing with some boys from the school who'd started a band. You ought to sign up for the talent show at the Daisy Theatre on Beale Street, she said. First prize was an audition at Stax Records, the hottest studio in Memphis.

Winning was the easy part. For the audition at Stax, Parker sang "The



One Who Really Loves You," a jumpy Motown number, written by Smokey Robinson, that was a hit for Mary Wells that year. But the producer was after something fresher. When Parker told him that she'd bring some new material next time, she was bluffing. She'd never written a song in her life. "That was the challenge," she says. "This was the early sixties in Memphis, Tennessee. Where in America could you get that opportunity, regardless of the color of your skin? I wanted to be an artist. I wanted to become a female vocalist to rival Aretha and Gladys Knight. I wanted legs like Tina Turner. And I was not going to be outdone."

One afternoon, forty-four years later, Cheryl Pawelski was listening to a tape of old Stax recordings when an unfamiliar track came on. Pawelski was a producer for Concord Music Group in Los Angeles. She was putting together a fiftieth-anniversary set of Stax hits, and looking for unreleased recordings for other collections. Most of the Stax catalogue was ingrained in her memory: "Soul Man," "Theme from Shaft," "I'll Take You There," "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay." It was music both blunt and seductive, plaintive and hard-hitting, driven by the world's best house band, led by the multi-instrumentalist Booker T. Jones. The Motown sound was polished, upbeat, radio-friendly. Stax was grittier and less accommodating—in 1972, the studio threw a benefit concert at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum to commemorate the Watts riots, of 1965. If Motown was Hitsville, the saying went, Stax was Soulsville.

Most Stax hits were written by teams of songwriters and sung by performers like Otis Redding, Isaac Hayes, Sam & Dave, and the Staple Singers. But this song, written by Deanie Parker and Mack Rice, seemed to belong to an alternate history. It was a driving, full-throated duet called "Until I Lost You," with strings and horns. It easily could have been a hit when it was written, in 1973, yet Pawelski had never heard it before. As she went through the Stax archives, she kept coming across recordings like this, marked as demos and sung by the songwriters themselves. Some were demos of songs that later became hits—raw, emphatic versions, often backed only by a guitar. Folk songs with a deeper pulse. Others, like "Until I Lost You," had been fully fleshed out in the studio but never released. "They were cut every which way," Pawelski said, when she told me about the demos a few years ago. "They are all fucking awesome."

I've known Pawelski for more than twenty years. When we first met, she was dating my brother's ex-wife, Audrey Bilger, an English professor and the drummer in an all-female blues band. They're married now. Pawelski has her own label, Omnivore Recordings, and has won three Grammy Awards for Best Historical Album. Audrey is the president of Reed College, in Portland, Oregon. In their house, every available storage space is stuffed with records, CDs, cassettes, and reel-to-reel tapes—more than seventy thousand in all. Pawelski says that she likes being a college president's wife, sitting next to an astrophysicist one night and a rhetorician the next. But it's hard to imagine her in the role. Her wardrobe seems to consist mostly of worn plaids and record-label T-shirts. She wears black rectangular glasses, her hair ruffled like a pile of straw, and charges around with her shoulders squared, her eyes fixed on the next thing and the next. She never seems to get enough sleep, and gives off an energy both frazzled and elated.



"We definitely weren't that happy on our way up."

Music has always been a treasure hunt to her. As a thirteen-year-old in 1979, living in Milwaukee, she was already trading bootleg concert tapes with collectors across the country—"waiting for the next bag of cassettes from Omaha," as she puts it. Her tastes were eclectic to the point of omnivory: ABBA, Ella Fitzgerald, Professor Longhair, the Clash, Krautrock, Afro pop—she loved it all. She would ride her bike to a local collector's house, and they'd trade copies of tapes they'd bought and lists of ones they wanted. She was fascinated by outtakes—demos and discarded studio recordings that tape traders would toss in at the end of a side. "These were songs that I knew backward and forward," she says. "But there would be a different guitar part, or lyrics that would wind up in an entirely different song. It brewed my little-kid brain. 'That's not the song! How did they do that?'"

Pawelski wanted to be part of that world, but she didn't know how. She could sing a little and play guitar, but she knew that she wasn't a gifted musician. She was obsessed with recordings but not that interested in making them. It was their secret history that consumed her—the story behind the story of the songs she loved. But how could you make a career out of that? "What do you do when you grow up in a sleepy Midwestern town with your ass on fire?" Pawelski says. "I was ambitious, but there is no track for doing what I do. There is no path that will take you there."

She was on it already, as it turned out. She took a job as a temp at Capitol Records and worked her way up until she was in charge of catalogue development. When she arrived, in 1990, CDs were replacing vinyl as the dominant format, and there was great profit to be made from reissues and boxed sets. By the time she left, a decade later, CD sales had peaked. Songs could be shared online, and streaming services were on the way. Anyone could compile a greatest-hits collection now: it was just another playlist. What you couldn't do was hear an artist's unreleased recordings—the songs buried so deep in the vaults that even their keepers had forgotten they were there. Pawelski knew where to find them.

When Pawelski talks about vaults of recordings, I imagine vast underground facilities filled with miles of mechanized shelving. I picture endless rows of master tapes in cardboard boxes marked with barcodes and serial numbers. There are places like that. Universal Music Group keeps some of its masters at Iron Mountain, a 1.7-million-square-foot storage facility deep within an abandoned limestone mine in western Pennsylvania. But the tapes that interest Pawelski aren't always so well preserved. Some were never logged by the studio or sent to a music publisher. Others were tossed out or misfiled. "A lot of these projects don't exist if I don't find them," Pawelski says.

The Stax masters were recorded on professional audiotape, but the demos came in every condition and format: cassette tapes, studio tapes, quarter-inch



Deanie Parker, shown with Al Bell, Jim Stewart, and the civil-rights leader Julian Bond, at a Stax sales conference in 1969.

COURTESY STAX MUSEUM OF AMERICAN SOUL MUSIC ARCHIVE

home recordings. When Stax went bankrupt, in 1975, its catalogue was chopped apart. Atlantic Records owned all the master recordings made before 1968. The rest were sold to Fantasy Records and later to Concord Music Group. But the demos were scattered across the country. A few ended up in Iron Mountain and places like it. ("There are salt mines everywhere," Pawelski says.) Some survived only on cassettes that were passed around Memphis for years. Most of the rest were owned by Rondor Music International, a publisher in L.A, but they'd been transferred to digital audiotape. Their original sources were destroyed. Worse, the digital tapes were a hodgepodge of recordings from various artists—everything from Broadway show tunes to songs by the Brazilian singer Milton Nascimento. To sift out the Stax material, Pawelski would have to listen to every tape from start to finish. There were thirteen hundred tapes in all—nearly two thousand hours of music.

"Some projects, I just roll over and I've got a record," Pawelski told me. "But the Stax one was pretty epic." For the next fifteen years, whenever she was on a plane, train, or road trip, she would listen to a tape or two between stops. When she was home, she would play them while she was working. "It's got to be horrible to live with me," she says. "I'd be sitting at the dining-room table and Audrey would be grooving in the kitchen, making dinner, but she never got to hear a full song. As soon as I knew what a track was, I'd go on to the next, until I got to 'Holy moly, listen to this!'"

There were a lot of those moments. By the time Pawelski listened to the last song on the thirteen hundredth tape—on a flight home from New York to Portland, as she recalls—she had found six hundred and sixty-five songs worth keeping. A buried treasure of soul. There were slinky R. & B. numbers and grinding blues, diaphanous ballads and floor-shaking shouters, backed by full horn sections. They were just demos, thrown together on the fly to convince a producer or a performer that a song was worth recording, but there was nothing tentative about them. Deanie Parker didn't sound like an ordinary songwriter on "Until I Lost You." She sounded like a star.

"So here's the thing," Pawelski says. "Everyone knows Otis Redding and Isaac Hayes. But do they know Homer Banks and Bettye Crutcher? Do they know Deanie Parker? To be able to honor some of these songwriters—it's more than just getting a cool record out for me. This is the last Stax story. A story that hasn't been told."

The studio was an oasis, Parker thought. From the moment she walked in for her audition, in 1962, she could tell that Stax wasn't like other places. Outside, on the streets of South Memphis, the cops would chase you away if you lingered too long on a corner; the shopkeepers

kept an eye on your hands as you went down the aisles. Inside Stax, there was no time for all that. People were too busy making music. The studio was in a converted movie theatre, across the street from a barbershop where one of the Stax drummers used to shine shoes. Its cavernous space was subdivided by curtains and sound panels of pegboard and burlap. The men's bathroom had been turned into an echo chamber; the concession stand was a record store. When the building was a theatre, it was for whites only, but the studio made no distinction. In every room, musicians Black and white were hashing out lyrics, honing bass lines, or bending over mixing boards, moving sliders into position. "It was magic," Parker says.

The label had been founded four years earlier by the brother-and-sister team of Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton. They started out in Stewart's wife's uncle's garage, then moved to an old storeroom along a railroad track in Brunswick, twenty miles east of Memphis. To get the money for a recording console, Axton took out a second mortgage on her house. By the time Parker came for her audition, they had bought the movie theatre and christened their label Stax—short for Stewart and Axton. A series of hits had followed, including "Gee Whiz," by Carla Thomas, and "Green Onions," by Booker T. & the M.G.s. Atlantic Records had agreed to distribute Stax recordings nationally. (It would be years before Stewart realized that the distribution deal included ownership of the master tapes.) And in 1965 Al Bell, a former d.j. who was a natural salesman, was named the head of promotions. But it was clear to the artists by then that the real money wasn't in selling records. It was in writing songs.

"We all realized it after we got that first royalty statement," Parker says. "I mean, it was a no-brainer." A recording artist made a few pennies on every record sold. But a songwriter earned royalties every time a song was covered by another musician or appeared on a recording or on sheet music. It was an endlessly branching revenue stream. Soon, the studio's musicians were pairing off to collaborate, vying with one another to write the best tunes: William Bell and Booker T. Jones, Eddie Floyd and Steve Cropper, Homer Banks and Bettye Crutcher, Isaac Hayes and David Porter, Mack Rice and Deanie Parker. They met in the Stax offices and studios and at the Four Way grill, where they liked to eat lunch. They went to the Lorraine Motel—one of the few such places in Memphis that allowed Black guests—and holed up in a room until a song was done.

The idea could come from anywhere. Bell and Jones wrote "Born Under a Bad Sign" for the blues guitarist Albert King in 1967, when astrology and mysticism were thick in the air. "I had a verse and chorus and bass line," Bell told me. "So Booker and I went to his house and finished it that night. Albert cut it the next day. He couldn't actually read, so I had to sing it in his ear. In a couple of takes, he had it down and put his iconic guitar on it." Floyd and Cropper wrote "Knock on Wood" at the Lorraine, in a honeymoon suite covered in plush red velvet. A storm was blowing outside, and Floyd recalled how that used to scare him as a boy. "I told Steve that my brother and I, when it started thundering and lightning like that, we would hide under the bed," Floyd says. Before long, another verse was done: "Our love is better than any love I know. It's like thunder, lightnin', the way you love me is frightenin'."

Cropper was born on a farm in Missouri, Floyd in rural Alabama; Jones was the son of a high-school science teacher; Bell had planned to become a doctor. Yet they shared the same language. "We had the same input, heard the same radio," Bell says. "One day gospel, the next day blues, then jazz, rhythm and blues, and country-and-Western. That was the beauty of it. We were all family."

For the most part, at least. Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton were white, as were the members of the original house band, the Mar-Keys. The songwriters were all Black, aside from Cropper, Bobby Manuel, and a few other musicians who contributed to songs. Music was their only common ground. "I had two different childhoods," Manuel told me. As a boy, he went to all-white schools and lived on an all-white block. Elvis Presley lived a few doors down, at 2414 Lamar Avenue; Manuel used to sneak over and hide in the bushes outside his window, just to hear him sing. But the Manuels' house backed onto an African American neighborhood, known as Orange Mound. So Manuel would often head over there to eat fried-bologna sandwiches with his friends Butch and Donny, and to listen to their uncle, Willie Mitchell, play the blues. "Some of my white friends would say, 'Why do you play with those guys?' But it wasn't such a thing to me," Manuel says. "When Willie came to Memphis, it was just like Elvis coming."

The other musicians had similar stories. By day, they lived separate lives in a segregated city. By night, they met onstage at the Flamingo Room or the Plantation Inn, or traded solos in jam sessions at the Thunderbird or Hernando's Hideaway. It was only at Stax that their two worlds came together—that they could work as closely, and equally, as they played. They just had to be good enough. "It was hard to get in there, man. I felt fortunate," Manuel told me. "That was the beginning."

For Deanie Parker, music meant a different sort of double life. After her audition at Stax, she went home, sat at the white piano that her mother had bought her—"It was the biggest damn thing you've ever seen"—and wrote a bouncy little love song called "My Imaginary Guy." For the B-side, she wrote a slow tune, "Until You Return," and she recorded them both in the studio. The single became a regional hit. She wrote her next song with Steve Cropper—a churning torch ballad called "I've Got No Time to Lose"—and thought that it would be her follow-up single. Instead, Carla Thomas walked through the studio one day and heard Cropper playing the chords. Thomas was the studio's biggest star. When she asked if she could record the song, the answer, of course, was yes. "Here's the thing you must understand," Parker says. "Jim Stewart would have volunteered to be in a fight with a bear to get the best song for Carla."

Stardom owes as much to circumstance as to talent. Fifty years later, it's hard to choose between Parker's demo of "I've Got No Time to Lose"

WHAT IS THE SMELL OF A CIRCLE?

Breast milk, yes, and tomato soup, fresh
algae blooming on the pond with one
carp quickening its surface. The egg-
colored rug on which snow slowly melted
from our boots. I remember
the slowness of the hour in which
we answered all the questions
our marriage counsellor put to us.
Imagine one of you has gotten sick.
Imagine the schools
you want your children educated in.
And you and I, healthy
but with no children, would spend the rest
of an afternoon arguing about
private schools and cancer treatments,
until rage had pared your face
to an acid set of lines and planes,
so that at restaurants the waitresses
would fill only your glass
with water, and the female students
at your law school, hearing
of our troubles, delivered pies
for you with notes expressing
sympathy, which I devoured alone,
tossing the notes they'd taped on the tins
for you into the trash. I gained
five pounds that winter, lost fifteen
the spring you moved out. Perhaps,
I remember telling the counsellor,
there are worse crimes than falling
out of love with one's own husband or falling
into some worse version of it
with someone else, though at the time
I couldn't imagine what those were.
Outside, in the counsellor's
parking lot, we would stand by the doors
of our separate cars, sullen and flushed,
as if each of us had contracted a specific
fever that began at the same hour
of the same day each week,
in the same location, even, the radiator
throwing off its blister
of heat, the rag rug, the counsellor's
window slowly filling up with snow. Only
after a week would the fever break, cooled
into half-hearted jokes,
or a stumbling embrace in our frozen yard:
some new understanding of what
we each could accept marriage to be—
not the same relationship but something
different, stranger, hard. I remember
walking past the bathroom door one night
and seeing you hunched there
over the sink, the wide, white

and Thomas's official release. Thomas finds a deeper, steadier groove, with the chorus crooning back her lines and punching in on the offbeat: "No! No! No!" The horns are fuller, swelling and fading in the background, and Cropper's guitar fills are more intricate and cleanly worked out. But Parker's version sounds more heartfelt, more true. She leans into the words like she's talking out loud, too distraught to care what people think: "I've got to find my man, make him understand. I've got to try and see if he'll come back to me." When two voices join in—"No time to lose, no time to lose"—they sound less like backup singers than like girlfriends sitting on her bed, echoing her words as she weeps.

"I've Got No Time to Lose" was a hit for Thomas. For Parker, it marked the end of her dream of becoming the next Aretha. She wasn't prolific enough to keep writing hits, and she didn't have the stomach for touring. She'd been on a couple of road trips with Thomas, Otis Redding, and Booker T. & the M.G.s, but she could never get used to being a Black musician in the South. "You couldn't check into a hotel or motel. You couldn't go in the front door of a restaurant. You couldn't go into a rest room in a service station," she says. "And, hell, if you were driving a luxurious automobile, you were really asking for trouble." Thomas had her father, Rufus, to protect her—they toured together as Rufus and Carla. Parker was alone and only eighteen years old. After the shows, the guys in the band would go out drinking or hang with groupies. Parker and Thomas had to stay back at the hotel and lock themselves in.

"I learned very quickly that I wasn't going to be a success on the road," Parker told me. "I didn't have the stamina to deal with it. Not in that time, in that place." Others kept at it. Thomas was still touring long after her father quit performing with her. Bettye Crutcher, Stax's only full-time female songwriter, continued composing while raising three sons as a single mother and working night shifts as a nurse. Her songs for Sam & Dave, the Staple Singers, and others would later be covered or sampled by everyone from Joan Baez to the Wu-Tang Clan. For Black women in an industry as cutthroat and unforgiving as music, success required more than talent and luck. It required sheer, unwavering drive.

Parker wasn't that single-minded. She enrolled in business classes at Memphis State University, worked part time in the studio's record store—the nerve center of Stax, where Estelle Axton played demos and new singles for customers and tracked their shifting tastes—and eventually established the Stax publicity department. "Those were the early days at Stax, when things hadn't galvanized yet," she told me. "We were all searching, all trying to master something, trying to define that Memphis sound." Parker

porcelain sides gripped in your palms, you
panting like a deer that had been struck
by a car. How much more pain
were we willing to endure to prove
we loved each other? Months
before we'd married, I remember we talked
about a child. It was Sunday, hot,
we'd been walking past the shut doors
of glass-fronted restaurants until we stopped
at a corner filled with shocking pink streaks
of bougainvillea. It's the one thing,
you told me, I really want. You were talking
about a child. Heady vanilla scent, and bees.
The sudden sense, as you touched your hand
to the back of my neck, that I hated
this embrace. Was it cruel
I never told you no? Was it cruel
you kept demanding it of me? The longer
we argued, the harder it became
to decipher what cruelty finally was: Was it cruel,
for instance, if one of us chose to sleep
on the couch, was it cruel if I fantasized
about living in Europe, or you kept a portrait
of a former wife on your bookshelf?
On the last day of therapy together,
you interrupted the counsellor
to say that in order for you to remain in any way
in my life, we would have to end the marriage
now. Do you understand? you asked me.
I touched my hand to the couch's
fraying comforter. There was,
I understood, no unlimited care
anyone should endure for another;
that, in the end, it was indeed love
that could make a reasonable person
leave a marriage. When I'm asked
to describe you to strangers now, I tell people
the truth: you were kind, you were curious,
we never hated each other, even
on our worst night when I came
into the kitchen to tell you
what you already knew, I'd done something
terrible, not naming it because
you begged me not to. It was the one
kindness I ever offered. I remember
how you screamed and flung
all the dishes in our cupboard
to the floor, one by one until I stood
inside a ring of white and blue and green porcelain
that bloomed around me. Every dish
we ever owned you threw, but even then,
in our worst sorrow, making sure
not one shard would touch me.

—*Paisley Rekdal*

was essential to the task. She knew the music from the inside, and she was an expert at shuttling between worlds. She would chaperone the artists on interviews and promotional tours—Johnnie Taylor and Albert King were a particular handful—and help explain their music to an indifferent or openly hostile press. "You can tell when a journalist really doesn't give a shit about you when they won't even look in your Black face, and that was typical," Parker says. "Sitting on a gold mine in Memphis, Tennessee!"

They paid attention eventually. Hits like "Knock on Wood" and Mack Rice's "Mustang Sally" were hard to ignore, and Parker had the eloquence and the poise to promote the rest. "Deanie is Memphis friggin' royalty," Pawelski says. "She's the reason, beyond the music, that Stax has such a huge footprint." Parker would release only one more single under her own name: a sultry girl-group number called "Each Step I Take." But she never stopped writing songs—including "Who Took the Merry Out of Christmas" for the Staple Singers and "Ain't That a Lot of Love," which Sam & Dave recorded. "I'm not the kind of person who can sit in a room like Carole King or Eddie Floyd, doing it over and over," Parker says. "A song comes to you in crazy ways and crazy places. Somebody might have just cussed you out, or made great love to you, or given you a piece of wisdom. I cannot plan for it. I just think"—she held up the flat of her hand—"let me do it when the spirit hits!"

The first time I heard the Stax demos, I was in a studio built by Pawelski's audio engineer, Michael Graves, in a garage behind his house in Altadena, California. Pawelski and I were slouched in wicker chairs facing a huge monitor on the wall. Graves was perched at a long desk in front of us, manipulating an iPad and an audio interface. When he played the first song—a demo of the 1966 hit "634-5789"—a spectrogram began to scroll across the screen, showing the song's rising and falling frequencies.

Pawelski and Graves were there to master the demos for a seven-CD collection called "Written in Their Soul." Pawelski had managed to winnow her hoard of six hundred and sixty-five songs to a hundred and forty-six. "That hurt," she said. "That left a mark." Fifty-eight were demos of official Stax releases; twenty-two were demos of songs on other labels; the other sixty-six were never released. "634-5789" was from the first batch. The hit version was sung by Wilson Pickett; the demo was by Eddie Floyd. Steve Cropper, who wrote the song with Floyd, played guitar on both takes, but the demo lacked the tight, chugging rhythm of the official release. The reason to hear it was Floyd. His singing had a sweet, almost bashful quality that belied the silky self-assurance underneath. Where Pickett yipped and rasped and leaped to falsetto, Floyd's voice was full of pleading

sincerity. "If you need a little lovin', call on me," he sang. "I'll be right here at home."

Graves paused the song and scrolled back through the spectrogram. He zoomed in on a jagged section where he'd heard a click—a frequency spike between five hundred and a thousand hertz—and smoothed it down. One click gone, a thousand more to go. Tall, fine-boned, and pale, with rose-gold spectacles and a tuft of blond hair, Graves worked with delicate, unhurried precision. When I first met him, in 2007, he was mastering an album of folk songs called "Art of Field Recording," for which he later won a Grammy. (He has since won three more, two of them with Pawelski.) He dealt mostly with old 78 records back then, trying to unearth music from beneath decades of nicks and scratches and needle wear. Pawelski's projects posed a different problem. The tracks that she collected were almost always on tape, but in a bewildering variety of formats. To play them, Graves needed a battery of devices that hadn't been made in years. "People talk about tapes disintegrating," he said. "They will outlive all of us. It's the machines that are the bottleneck." His house was a museum of obsolete technology, populated with devices of every shape and vintage: MiniDisc, Hi8, DAT, ADAT, and DTRS players, and quarter-inch, half-inch, and two-inch reel-to-reel players. "You can go down a serious rabbit hole of collecting weird, esoteric gear," Graves said.

Without the machines, the music would be lost. But even if you had the right gear and kept it running—"The know-how to fix these machines is almost gone," Graves said—the recordings could sound terrible. Some were made on noisy boom boxes: you could hear the thunk of the Record button. Some were transferred to digital tape at fluctuating speeds, so the music wobbled out of pitch. Some were recorded on four-track tape but were transferred to two tracks, so two songs would play at once, or one would play forward and the other backward. The newer the tape, the worse its condition. Starting in the eighties, a new adhesive was used to bind magnetic particles to tapes. This absorbed moisture over time, rendering some tapes unplayable. Digital tape was even worse. An analog recording might sound a little dull after a few years, but digital tape lost whole chunks of code. "Either the sound goes away or it's an ear-piercing screech," Graves said. "Whatever is trying to read that tape just says, 'Nope.'"

Fortunately, he had some digital tools to compensate. If a track went silent for a few measures, Graves might clone a similar passage elsewhere in the song and drop it into the gap. If the song was missing a beginning or an end, he could create one out of a guitar riff or a drum fill. He was like a record producer working on a miniature scale. At one point, Graves pulled up a demo of a song called "Coming Together." Written by Homer Banks and Carl Hampton, it was an earnest appeal for peace, set to a sinuous groove. "Why must bullets fly before we live as one?" Banks sang. "Why must so many die now, before we ban the guns?" Banks was a Vietnam veteran and a former gospel singer. He sang with keening conviction, but the recording was strangely muffled. Pawelski grimaced. "Now you have to unfuck that for me," she said. Graves laughed. "My life in noise."

He suspected that when the original tape was transferred to digital it was spooled onto the player incorrectly, flipping the tape inside out. "It sounds like a pillow was held over the speaker," he said. He tried boosting the upper frequencies to lift the music out of the murk. That brightened the instruments but added a loud hiss. A digital denoiser could get rid of that, Graves said, but raising the top end had also distorted the singing. To fix it, he needed a program of more recent invention, known as a de-mixer. It took the original recording and disentangled its parts, sending each instrument to a separate track. Graves could now work on the vocal line alone, clarifying the sound without distorting it. When he was done, he dropped it back into the mix and moved on to the next song.

"'Demo' stands for 'demonstration,'" Pawelski said. "This is not going to sound like it was made last week." Yet most of the recordings were startlingly clear. The rock and folk demos that I was used to hearing were mostly home recordings. The singer strummed a guitar, or played some chords on a piano, and mumbled a few cryptic lines into a cassette deck. These were nothing like that. All but a few of the demos were professionally recorded, in the same studios as the official Stax releases. Homer Banks, William Bell, and the other songwriters had all been singers first, and the musicians were a crack unit, always on call. Al Jackson, Jr., the drummer in the M.G.s, lived just around the corner



"Comedy show after the beheading! Free with flyer!"

from the studio. "It'd be two in the morning and we'd call him up, say, 'We've got something going!'" Eddie Floyd told me. "Twenty minutes later, he's walking through the door."

On official releases, the arrangements were more intricate, more subtly fused: vocals, guitar, horns, and rhythm section, all interlaced in a shimmering fabric. "This music is so much about the groove, about the underlying bass and guitar," Manuel told me. "It took a long time to get right—it could take twenty or thirty tries. It had to have that magic, the right lick for that moment, and it hooked you. You couldn't sit still."

The demos didn't always have that magic, but they had their own sort of potency. These weren't just sketches or aide-mémoire. They were audition tapes—a writer's one chance to sell a song to an artist or a producer. Yet they were never meant to be released. Even the best songs that Pawelski found had long since been filed and forgotten. She could dust them off and restore their sound, but she sometimes had no idea who the musicians were, or who wrote the songs.

For that, she needed Deanie Parker.

"I want this to be good, but not too good," Parker said, setting a Crockpot full of spaghetti on a table. "I don't want them to think that they're here to fill up." We were standing at a buffet station in the Stax Museum of American Soul Music, waiting for the other Stax songwriters to arrive. Built in 2003 on the site of the former studio, the museum is part music school, part performance space, archive, and memorabilia collection. (Booker T. Jones's Hammond organ and Cropper's Telecaster sat in glass cases along the walls.) Parker had swept in a few minutes earlier in black pants and a sunflower-yellow top, her shoulders wrapped in a jewel-toned silk scarf. Her hair was pure white and pulled back into a French roll, her round cheeks still unlined at seventy-six. "I'm responsible for the mood food," she said. She took two bottles of strawberry Fanta from a shopping bag and plunked them on the table. "We'll have to toast each other with red pop."

An elegant older gentleman, with a snowy beard and a brocaded vest, sauntered over and lifted the lid on the Crockpot. "I hope it's edible," he said.

"Henderson, that was not the right thing to say."

"What would be nice is some bologna and crackers."

"You can get your own little freaky food."

Henderson Thigpen was one of Parker's early collaborators at Stax. They wrote their first song together in 1966—"It's Catching," sung by Mable John—when Thigpen was eighteen. He had grown up on a cotton farm in Red Banks, Mississippi, writing poetry and reciting it in the fields. "I was a mama's boy," he told me. As soon as he graduated from high school, he started taking the Greyhound to Memphis every weekend, just to hang around Stax and learn how to write songs. Parker eventually took him under her wing. Bobby Manuel taught him some guitar, and Thigpen went on to co-write some of the label's last hits, including "Woman to Woman," by Shirley Brown, which reached No. 1 in 1974. Thigpen was now seventy-five and living back on the family farm. He had come up from Mississippi at Parker's request to help identify Pawelski's demos. They hadn't heard some of the songs in more than fifty years.



Pawelski walked past us on her way to the archive—she'd spent the day there, looking for photographs of the songwriters. "We just saw you partying with Janis Joplin," she told Parker. Parker laughed and fell in behind her, along with Thigpen. "I couldn't keep up!" she said, "When I heard about the after-party? That wasn't my pay grade." The pictures that Pawelski had found were mostly black-and-white, with an occasional Kodachrome thrown in. It was hard to believe that they were half a century old. The people looked so vibrantly alive: Otis Redding, Rufus Thomas, the Staple Singers, and others less known but equally dashing, draped on couches and standing on street corners, scribbling in notebooks and gathered around microphones. They wore beads and headbands, porkpie hats and department-store dresses, seemingly unaware that they were future royalty.

"You see these really square-looking people next to really groovy-looking people," Pawelski said. "And you think, What's happening here? But everything in this picture is serving the music. That's the privilege of being in those rooms. The only qualifiers are how good you are." Bobby Manuel had joined us and was bent over Pawelski's shoulders beside Parker and Thigpen, looking at the pictures. There was one of Manuel as a lanky young hipster in a cowboy shirt, with a scruffy mustache. He was rounder now, with silver hair and shy, thoughtful eyes, but still dapper in a suède jacket. "There's O. B. McClinton," he said, pointing to a rugged-looking man with long sideburns and a heavy overbite. McClinton was Stax's only Black country artist—its answer to Charley Pride, the RCA star.

"Lord, I hated to get hung up with O.B.," Parker said.

"He would keep you forever."

"I did not like to shake his hand. He had the hand of a reptile. Cold!"

Music could sometimes blur the lines between genders. A good song was a good song, whether it was written by Isaac Hayes or by Bettye Crutcher. As long as women like Carla Thomas and Mavis Staples were producing hits, all the writers courted them. The demos were full of musical cross-dressing, as male songwriters sang lyrics meant for women, and vice versa. "We women work hard every day, doing our very best," Homer Banks complained in "Too Much Sugar for a Dime." "But you men will buy tires for your automobiles and get mad if we buy a dress."

Still, role-play wasn't the same as real equality. Parker's mood food was part of a long tradition of women taking care of men at Stax. As a publicist, Parker was everyone's champion and mother confessor. "They are interesting creatures, and you know their temperature," she said. "I can't remember anybody storming out of the office, but



PANDORA'S PACKAGE

whining, yes. Whining was common. Some of us can't accept our own failures." Even Crutcher, who died last fall, and who was one of the label's best and most prolific writers, sometimes needed extra leverage to get her songs heard. "Bettye was soft-spoken, and the writers protected their turf," Parker said. "So she would cook a pot of spaghetti. That's what she would do. And when she had finished feeding these jokers"—she arched an eyebrow at Henderson and Manuel—"they were ready to cut anything."

The songwriters took their seats around a conference table in the museum's main gallery. Parker, Thigpen, and Manuel sat next to a video feed of William Bell, at his home in Atlanta, wearing shades and a black baseball cap. Pawelski was beside Robert Gordon, the author of the 2013 book "Respect Yourself: Stax Records and the Soul Explosion." Gordon and Parker would be writing the demo collection's liner notes together. "Are you going to doctor the demos up to make them sound better?" Thigpen wanted to know.

"I would never think to add any instrumentation," Pawelski said.

"I just had to ask. Because I know some of those demos."

"Henderson, let me tell you, you sound great," Parker said. "If I hadn't been so in love with Johnnie Taylor, I would have gone for you." She lifted her cup of red soda and offered a toast to another forty years. Then Pawelski played the first song.

It was a girl-group number backed by a bluesy honky-tonk piano, called "You Make a Strong Girl Weak." Isaac Hayes and David Porter were the songwriters, but who were the singers? Manuel guessed the Soul Children. Or was it Jeanne & the Darlings? "That makes every kind of sense," Parker said. Jeanne Dolphus, the group's leader, was a home-economics teacher from Arkansas who sewed the band's costumes at night, she said. "They wore everything alike, and they were *not* fashion designers. Let me tell you something: Henderson says Mississippi is slow. Arkansas is from the *dinosaur* age."

And so it went. Pawelski would play a demo, names would fly around the table—"David Porter!" "Byrd Burton!" "That's Crop on the guitar!"—and a flood of reminiscences would follow. That jangly piano part must have been recorded in Studio C; it had an old brown upright in it. But that flabby bass sound was definitely from Studio B—it never had much bottom end. A high voice with a bit of a quaver came over the speakers, and suddenly it was as if Carl Smith, who wrote "Higher and Higher" and "Rescue Me," was standing there in the room, with his oversized glasses and boyish grin. And that deep moan? It could only be Mack Rice, mouthing his improbable rhymes—thrown, gone, own, telephone. The longer they listened, the more the gallery around them seemed to fade, replaced by the dusky halls and echoing rooms of the old theatre. Every song was a memory palace, every instrument a key to a different door—though not always the same one for every listener.

"That sounds like Jeanne again."

"Not unless she was taking hormones."

At one point, Parker asked to hear "Woman to Woman," Thigpen's biggest hit. The song was inspired by a conversation that he'd overheard between his second wife and one of her friends. "It was just like when men say, 'Let's talk it out man to man,' only this was woman to woman," he said. In the demo, Thigpen delivered the opening monologue in a gently aggrieved voice—a wounded lover trying to talk sense into a rival: "Barbara, this is Shirley. . . . I was going through my old man's pockets this morning, and I just happened to find your name and number. So, woman to woman . . . it's only fair that I let you know that the man you're in love with, he's mine, from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet."

"This is going to be on the album?"

"Yeah."

Thigpen covered his face with his hand. But then, after a moment, his voice on the recording began to sing—a rich, warm baritone with a delicate vibrato: "Woman to woman, can't you see where I'm coming from? Woman to woman, ain't that the same thing you would've done?" The other songwriters were snapping their fingers now, as the bass and the drums found their

groove and Thigpen's voice rose to a soft, clear falsetto. He looked up and grinned. "That's the money note right there," he said.

"Woman to Woman" was the studio's final hit. A year and a half later, Stax was forced into bankruptcy, done in by mounting debt, bad distribution deals, lawsuits, and accusations of bank fraud and tax evasion. Federal marshals served an eviction order on January 12, 1976, while Manuel was rehearsing in the studio. They marched him and the other employees to the parking lot in single file, with Jim Stewart in front, and padlocked the doors behind them. Parker's utopia was long gone. The dream of music as a refuge from racism and violence was always a fragile thing. At Stax, it was shattered eight years earlier, when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated at the Lorraine Motel—the same place where so many songwriters, Black and white, had done their best work together.

On the night that King was shot, Parker and Crutcher went to the studio to work on a song for Albert King. "I had to get to Stax," Parker later said. "I didn't even think about stopping at home. I needed to be with the people I loved, the people I trusted—with the people who could understand what I was feeling." A curfew had been declared to prevent rioting, and Parker could hear the National Guard walking on the roof above the studio. If the soldiers hadn't discovered them and sent them home, she says, she and Crutcher would have kept writing through the night.

The Stax demos traced the full arc of that history—from hope and denial to disillusion and protest. The songs were messy, unfiltered, incomplete. The voices faltered and the musicians missed notes. By the end of our session at the museum, no one doubted that the demos were worth releasing. But the question remained: Why now and not then? What was missing from these songs in the first place?

Earlier that week, I had gone to see Steve Cropper in Nashville, where he now lives. He was too busy to come to the museum, he said, and wasn't especially interested in hearing the demos: "If I'd known they'd release them, I would have erased them." Tall and craggy, with a balding pate, a white beard, and a ponytail, Cropper looked like an old moonshiner, or an elder in some austere religious sect, but he spoke with easy, self-deprecating bluntness. He was a ubiquitous figure in the stories about Stax—hanging around the studio at all hours, playing guitar or running the board, pairing up with other writers at will, like a free radical in a pool of more stable molecules. "Cropper was convenient," Parker told me. "He was always around. Did he help with my lyrics? Not a lot. But he would fill in the pieces that were missing. He could sharpen your song. He was like the shoelaces on the shoe—ain't no good if the shoe doesn't hold together."

Cropper had the same refining touch on the guitar. He wasn't a flashy player, but he knew just what a tune needed—whether a quick rockabilly fill or the two-note slide at the beginning of "Soul Man." Cropper was always working on new material. When we met, he was recording a tune with his engineer, Eddie Gore, in the historic RCA Studio A building, where Chet Atkins and Jerry Lee Lewis used to record. He was hoping to pitch his song to Shemekia Copeland, who'd had a minor hit with a chorus that began, "I'm drivin' out of Nashville with a body in the trunk." Cropper's song was of a milder sort. He'd come up with the idea at a bar down the street, watching a young woman dance in shoes that were too big for her. He and Gore had recorded the demo that day—an easy, mid-tempo ballad, with Cropper's voice croaking amiably over the beat:

> Now I'm dancing in my mother's shoes
> Looking for someone to hold on to
> Wondering what Mama would do
> Now that I'm dancing in my mama's shoes.

"I know I can't sing," he said, switching off the tape. "I can write a pretty good song, but I can't sing shit from Shinola." But then this demo was never meant to be heard—not by the public anyway. As long as Copeland, or some other singer, could hear the gist of the song in the demo, it had done its work. Cropper was a perfectionist by nature, a fixer, a finisher. He had no patience for rough edges or unruly inspiration. Look at "Friends in Low Places" by Garth Brooks, Gore said. When that song, written by Dewayne Blackwell and Earl Bud Lee, became a smash in the late eighties, everyone assumed that it was a surefire hit. Who could resist that melody and title? But another singer, David Wayne Chamberlain, had recorded the song before Brooks did, and no one bought it. Success was all in the execution. "As far as I'm concerned, anything I write can be a hit," Cropper said.

The Stax demos tell a different story. It's hard not to feel, as you listen to them, that success is arbitrary, ephemeral. That inspiration is what lasts. Toward the end of the session in the museum, Pawelski played a recording that no one could identify. The singer's name wasn't written down, and he never sang at Stax again. Pawelski suspected that the demo was taped at one of the "neighborhood auditions" that the studio held on Saturday afternoons, open to anyone with a song. "Was on a cold Saturday night and we just had a fight," the singer began. "You walked out on me, knowing that you killed my heart with grief." His voice was hoarse with loss, accompanied only by finger snaps and a glimmering electric guitar, like rain in a gutter. He sounded hopeless, abandoned, as if he knew that there was no point in begging, but he couldn't help but do so. "Just walk on back," he sang, and a pair of voices joined in to help carry the tune. "Walk on back. I don't care how long it takes if you just walk on back."

It was only one song, salvaged from a pile of old rejects. The arrangement was simple, the artist unknown. But if it lacked the polish of a full Stax production, it had something more elemental: urgency and need. Like Parker and Thigpen, this singer knew that he had one chance to be heard. One chance to strip a song to its essence. He and his bandmates must have practiced for days, in a bedroom or a basement or on an empty street corner, till their harmonies chimed like bells and their voices dipped and swooped in perfect synchrony. "Walk on baa-aack." For just one take, they sounded as good as anyone. "That first take had the feel," Eddie Floyd told me. "The way I thought of it, every song was a demo. It was always the first time." ♦



Do You Love Me?

Hila Blum

LISA SORGINI

The first time I saw my granddaughters, I was standing across the street, didn't dare go any closer. The windows in the suburban neighborhoods of Groningen hang large and low—I was embarrassed by how effortlessly I'd got what I'd come for, frightened by how easily they could be gobbled up by my gaze. But I, too, was exposed. The slightest turn of their heads and they would have seen me.

The girls took no interest in the goings on outside. They were entirely absorbed in themselves, in their small concerns. Girls with the kind of light, thin hair that spills between your fingers like flour. They were alone in the living room, too close within my reach. Had I been asked, I would have been at a loss to explain my presence. I left.

I waited for darkness to fall and lights to flicker on inside houses. This time I ventured closer, hesitating for a few moments before I crossed the street. I was astonished by the ease with which the family moved about. That was not how I remembered my daughter—I was stunned by the power of her presence. I whispered her name, "Leah, Leah," just to make sense of what I was seeing. I stood there, not for long, just a few minutes. Leah's daughters, Lotte and Sanne, were sitting at the dimly lit dining-room table and yet seemed to be in constant motion. Her husband, Johan, stood in the kitchen with his back to me, toiling over dinner, while Leah passed between the rooms, crucified by the window frame, disappearing from one room and reappearing in another, bending reality as if she could walk through walls. Though the living-room fireplace wasn't lit, it wrapped the house in warmth. Gave it a homeyness, that's what it was. And there were books everywhere, even in the kitchen. The household looked wholesome, everything about it meant to evoke the innocence of raw materials. And because I was watching my daughter and her family without their knowledge, I was vulnerable to witnessing what wasn't mine to witness; I was running the spectator's risk.

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A woman in an Anne Enright novel I once read was from Dublin and had eleven siblings. When she grew up and got married, she had two daughters. Her young daughters *have never walked down a street on their own. They have never shared a bed*. The woman didn't reveal much more about her daughters, but I understood that what she meant to say by this is that she loved them and, at the same time, didn't know how to love them. And there's the rub, the problem with love. She tried.

They went on vacation, the woman, her husband, and the girls, a family road trip; a silly argument broke out and the woman looked briefly in the car mirror and saw one of her daughters in the back, staring into space. She noticed that her daughter's *mouth had sunk inwards*, and *saw*, *with terrible prescience*, *the particular thing that would go wrong with her face*, *either quickly or slowly*, *the thing that could grab her prettiness away before she was grown*. In those very words. And the woman thought, *I have to keep her happy*.

When I read this, I already had a young girl of my own. Leah. As a toddler, she was spirited and loud. Whispering in her tiny ears—and in her father's big ones—I called her Foghorn. Meir and I marvelled at our foghorn. I had other names for her, too, dozens of them. I missed her every moment I spent in the studio, and scooped her into my arms every time we were reunited. My love for my baby daughter came easily. Her father was also in love with her; we talked about her every night after she fell asleep, thanked each other for the gift that was our girl. All that I had been denied I gave to her, and then some. And she loved me, too.

Everything about this baby—the drool dribbling down her chin and pooling at her neck, her urine-soaked diapers, the sticky discharge from her eyes and nose when she was sick—everything about Leah was good. Sometimes, looking at her or sniffing her, I'd start salivating, feel a sudden urge to sink my teeth into her. I'm going to eat you, I'd tell her, I'm going to gobble you up! Then Leah would laugh, and I'd tickle her to elicit more of those roaring giggles.

When she was four, I wanted another baby. I told Meir, Just imagine: two Leahs. As if that could also mean, Say no. Which he did. I was angry at him for months, until the whole thing fell by the wayside. Meir crossed into his fifties, we moved to a bigger apartment, arrived at the sweet spot of our careers, slept soundly, kept up with our four-year-old, five-year-old, six-year-old Leah, lacked for nothing. And Leah grew up.

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You see it a lot in movies. A family in a car, the father at the wheel, the mother striking in a captivatingly careless way, the two children jazzed up in the back, everyone talking at once. This is the *before* life, and something bad is about to happen. A roadside assault. A horrible secret from the past. Your daughter's sinking mouth.

I would have liked to hear about more families like ours, mine and Meir's and Leah's, about mistakes that are so easily made and yet somehow beyond forgiveness. The day-to-day mishaps. The crimes of will.

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I didn't stay overnight in Groningen. When I planned the trip, all I wanted was to see my daughter with my own eyes, and, once I had, I would immediately make my way back to Amsterdam and wait for my return flight to Israel. Perhaps I was wary of the drawn-out hours of darkness in Groningen, or couldn't find another way to convince myself of my good faith.

At the Groningen railway station I boarded a 9:18 P.M. train to Amersfoort, where I switched trains and headed to Amsterdam. I used to navigate Europe's highways completely unafraid. On our trips to France, Austria, Germany, Scandinavia, Meir and I took turns behind the wheel. We both loved the sudden bends that revealed a mountain range or a glimmering lake-carved valley, and the gas stations where pockmarked teenage boys worked the coffee machines and hot-dog rollers, entire lives that went on long after our departure and upon which we left no mark. But now I didn't trust myself. I could easily have got lost in thought and taken the wrong exit or flipped into a ditch. I decided I would be better off taking the train. I was also hoping to get some sleep during the ride, but every time I closed my eyes I was back in front of the picture window in Groningen.

I thought about Meir, and what he

might have said had he known. I had always feared his reproach, a fear that hadn't waned even six years after his death. That ghost still stared me down. And suddenly a strange memory came back to me, something I hadn't thought about in years and wouldn't have been able to summon even if prompted to recount the beautiful moments; there it was, bobbing to the surface. We had gone to Paris together, our first trip as a couple. It was winter, and every time we walked down the steps to the Métro he would say, "Walk ahead a little, keep going, I like to look at you."

I remember how it made me laugh that first time. How charming I found it. "What?"

"I look at you and think, Who is this girl?" he said. "She's gorgeous. Who does she belong to? If I tried talking to her, would she even give me the time of day?"

I burst into laughter, it was so silly.

"Walk," he urged me, "walk. So I can look at you. Please."

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One summer we spent a week at a holiday village in Germany—Meir, Leah, and I. A vast R.V. site stretched north from the village, dozens and dozens of R.V.s parked among the trees in prim order governed by the ancient European know-how of creating privacy where none exists, uniform yet distinct and entirely still—hard to believe how quiet. In the evening we ambled about this R.V. land, the three of us, glimpsing personal lives laid bare: the colorful mats, the awnings, the clotheslines strung with sheets, towels, and the occasional bathing suit—never underwear, no bras. In R.V. land, no one forced nudity of any sort upon his neighbor, and it felt as though we could fit in, we would know how to be European; we got the rules, especially Leah, who had a natural understanding of the world and blended in effortlessly. Most of the campers were older couples, sun-toasted orange. Some were aging hippies but others were ordinary folk, retired professionals perched on folding chairs beside the doors to their travel vans, silently gazing out at the darkening day, or poring over a book, or talking with the hushed composure of couples who told each other their big stories years ago and have no more gaps to fill in. No one played music or moved too fast, not even the young families who arrived with their children and were now in the middle of their dinner and bedtime routines, and the arduous journey into sleep. Only once, at the edge of the campground, did the sound of crying pierce the air, and a girl flashed by the entrance to an R.V., a flicker of pink spandex and long hair, like the dizzying daytime flutter of girls filling the nearby beach, and suddenly a single shout, piercing, hypnotic—*Leah, komm her, Leah!*—before the girl was swallowed back into the R.V. She continued to cry, now with louder wails clearly intended for our ears. I held my hand out to Leah at the very moment Meir extended his toward her, and the three of us scampered away, hand in hand, impervious in our unity.

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In the holiday resort, I occasionally thought I heard Hebrew, but when pausing to listen I would invariably find that I was mistaken. It was another language, I couldn't tell what, dazed as I was by the distance from home, by the vacation itself. And on the nearby beach the girls in their neon-bright bathing suits and wind-tousled hair all looked the same age to me; I couldn't tell the four-year-olds from the eight-year-olds—the colors and the language had a blurring effect, as did the pervasive quiet, around the pool, in the beachside restaurants, at the souvenir stands hawking mass-produced mementos piled high alongside the crocheted trinkets, jewelry made of shells and wood, beach towels, and cheap plastic toys.

On our first night there, after her shower, Leah bounced about the room, thudding against the walls like a moth trapped in a lampshade, wearing me down. The preparations, the flight, the long drive—I wanted to sleep. I looped her in my arms to calm her down and kissed her neck and sang to her, and she cried quietly for a few minutes before falling asleep. But after that trying night the three of us settled into a laid-back holiday routine. We spent the week playing. Lego, puzzles, card-matching games. I didn't find the games themselves enjoyable—maybe only dressing the dolls and brushing their hair, serving them dinner in tiny plastic dishes and tucking them in for the night in their boxes—but Leah was positively delighted, and even as she grew up Meir and she kept at it, playing checkers and chess and backgammon, competing with passion and perseverance. In those years I didn't play with them anymore, their pleasure alone was no longer enough to reel me in, but on long drives, the three of us in the car with mile upon mile of open road ahead of us, I sometimes agreed to join them and at times even suggested a game myself. When it came to word and trivia games, I almost always won; I was quicker than they were, but their imaginations shone brighter, and they understood each other with a mere glance.

One evening that week, in our small spotless room at the resort, we were about to gather up the card game and head out to dinner, but Leah begged us: just one more round, the last one. We flipped the cards face down and shuffled.

"Who's going first?"

"Me!" Leah cried. "Me!"

We'd played with that deck hundreds of times, such that many of the cards were bent and stained; I could pick out three pairs by the scratches on the back, and Leah could pick out many more. We considered this within the rules.

"Go ahead," I said.

Leah matched four pairs in a row before striking out. I matched two. Meir struck out on his first try.

"Your turn," I told her.

She looked at me for a moment, then at the cards.

"Well?" Meir said, to urge her along. "I'm hungry."

Leah had already started turning over a card when she said she had changed her mind and was choosing a different one.

"But you already saw what's on that one," I said. "It's not fair."

"I didn't," Leah replied.

"Liki," I protested, "come on now . . ."

"She says she didn't see it," Meir said.

"But—" I began, but Meir shushed

me and I decided to let it go. "O.K., fine."

Leah flipped a new card, then another, and placed the pair on her stack. I rolled my eyes. When I played, I played to win. She reached for another card.

"Leah'le," Meir said quietly, "you know what's more important than winning."

Horrified, I shot him a look. He met my gaze and said, "She knows that telling the truth is more important than winning."

Leah picked up two more cards—another pair. But her lower lip quivered and her head sank forward as she whispered, "I don't want to play anymore."

How could I bear it? I couldn't. "Sweetheart," I said leaning toward her, "don't cry . . ."

"I saw the card," she sobbed. "I said I didn't but I did . . ."

I was distraught. I wanted to recant, go back, rewind.

"It's O.K.," Meir said. "We all make mistakes. Continue, Leah'le."

But she threw herself onto the cards. We couldn't continue. We went to dinner.

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When I return from Holland, Art picks me up from the airport. I didn't ask him to, but it seemed like a given to him. We have been together for a few months now, and before I embarked on my journey he asked for the details of my return flight. "I'll be there to greet you, Yoella," he said. "You're not alone."

Meir and I didn't wait for each other at airports. We didn't make each other coffee when we prepared ourselves a cup. We were happy to if the other asked, of course; what I mean is that we didn't offer. Once, when I got stuck on the side of the highway with an empty gas tank, I didn't call him. Later, he had it out with me. He would have come right away; waiting on the shoulder for roadside assistance for more than two hours was insanity, it was so dangerous, what was I thinking. And, honestly, I don't know what I was thinking. I could never anticipate what he deemed the right thing to do.

But when Leah and I flew back from our brief travels in Europe he always showed up. We would walk into the arrivals area and sweep our gazes around the hall, worried that perhaps he had forgotten, but he always came, and Leah would rush toward him, wedging herself into his arms; and when I reached them he always extended his arm and pulled me into the hug, looping the three of us.

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In the morning, whenever we could, we would head out together for the bus stop at the intersection. Leah would sit there waiting for her bus to school, while Meir and I continued north on the footpath that led up to the campus where we both worked. I feared that walk, thirty minutes of dread waiting for Leah to reach her destination and text me; and if she happened to forget I would be paralyzed with anxiety.

Only once did Meir lose his patience. "She's a teen-ager," he said. He didn't raise his voice. "She gets to school, sees a friend at the gate, and forgets everything else, including texting you, so let her be."

He was right. Worry is a straitjacket, and so is love. I promised to do a better job of holding myself together. But even when she was out of view I was watching closely, I don't know exactly what. I was cautious, but it was a conjuring caution, akin to superstition; I knew that if I covered all my bases Leah would come back. I would hear her footsteps on the stairs. She would appear at the door. And how surprised I was each time anew, not by the fact of her return but by her palpability; she was more real than anything I could remember.

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Back home, I try to remember what my life was like before I saw my daughter through the window of her Groningen home. The hour before sleep sets in is a pothole I struggle to skirt. I pick up a book I started reading before my trip



"And now, for our final piece of the night, 'Lo-Fi Beats to Relax/Study To.' "

to Holland and wait for Art to put his hand on my arm to let me know that it's O.K. That I'm O.K. That I should give it time.

Winter is over. I slowly regain my concentration. I have no plan. In a recurring dream, I go back to Groningen, knock on the door, and wait. It is dark outside, and my daughter's lit house is unfathomable and unbearably tempting, as if I were a homeless person. I pound on the door, again and again, each blow louder than the last.

With Art's gentle prodding, we go out to plays, movies, restaurants. Every few weeks we have Art's daughter and her family over for dinner at my house. I'm grateful for Sharona's two small boys, spirited redheads who can't possibly remind me of us.

On other days, after dinner, we carry our wineglasses to the living room and watch the news. Art almost always stays over, and before lights-out he gathers the dishes we have scattered around the house, folds the TV blanket, and plumps the couch pillows. Darkness requires order. Then we convene in the shared destiny of the night. In the bathroom we maneuver around each other, readying ourselves. Brushing teeth, washing faces. Art gets into bed before me, turns on both our reading lamps, folds down the edge of the blanket for me, and with his hands resting loosely on his heart waits for me to join him. But we never read the same books—together in the ocean of the bed, we each cling to our own raft, floating to wherever it will take us.

Meir liked the nighttime, and when I retired to the bedroom he would sit at his desk writing his essays and grading student papers; but sometimes he would nip into our room first to say good night, talk for a bit, screw. It was only during my difficult periods that we traded places—months when I stayed awake while he cleared the way and went to bed, letting me have the nights to myself.

•

They sat together in the kitchen, talking and laughing.

"How much do you love your dad?" Meir asked, and Leah said, "A million kajillion."

"That's all?"

"Plus two."

"Now we're talking!"

And Leah snorted and said, "Haha, Dad. Hilarious."

They fell silent when I entered, as if I couldn't possibly understand.

But she, Leah, had asked me countless times over the years, "Do you love me, Mom?" and I would reply, "More than anything in the world," and she would ask, "You're sure?" and I would reply, "Plus seven," and she would say, "Round it up to ten and we'll shake on it," and never, not once, not in any way, shape, or form, did I return the question.

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Nearly a year goes by from the day Leah leaves until the boy calls, the man—I don't know how old this person with a deep and booming voice is, a voice rising from a well—and asks to speak to Leah's mother.

"Speaking," I say, heart racing. I have not seen my daughter in eleven months and have not heard from her in weeks.

The fellow informs me that Leah is in the mountains, in Nepal, that everything is fine, she's fine. He met up with her two weeks ago and she asked him to call us upon his return to Israel to let us know she was O.K.

"In Nepal," I repeat his words. Forty-four days I have not heard from her. "In the mountains?"

"Yes," he says. And he says something else, about a phone that stopped



working. Cell-reception issues. I don't understand exactly what, and yet I rush to say, "Yes, of course."

"She'll be staying there a while longer," the fellow says. "At least a few more weeks. Maybe more."

I once knew a man with that kind of voice. I was working at an ad agency at the time, he was an account manager, and, no matter what he said or wanted to say, his voice rippled and rattled through my body, the bass reverberating in all surrounding matter.

So many things I want to say and ask. I sit down on the couch with the phone shaking in my hand. She turned nineteen two weeks ago, I called her countless times that day, the next day, too. I didn't stop trying.

At night, in bed, I tell Meir. A Yaniv called today, or Yariv, I couldn't recall his name, said Leah says hi. She's in the mountains. In Nepal. There's no reception there. Or she doesn't have a phone. Never mind. It makes no difference.

Meir gives me a puzzled look. When did this happen? This morning? How could I not have told him until now? And before he can get another word out I say, "She slept with him, that much is obvious. She's fine, sleeping around with men. Nothing to worry about."

Meir's look goes from surprise to shock. We've been out of our minds with worry, waiting on pins and needles, and finally we've been put at ease—what's wrong with me?

I cry and he hugs me. "Don't cry." He has always dreaded my tears, resented me for them. Now they're a relief for us.

•

From that day on, they call regularly, every month or two. It's always men who've crossed Leah's path, who trekked the mountains with her, the forests, the remote villages, places whose names are shot so quickly they land far outside my reach. Emissaries through whom she sends word not to worry, everything's fine, she's fine. She asks that when they arrive at a main city, at an area with cell reception, in Israel, at home, they call us, and they do. Not to worry. In these men's voices I hear complacent caution, that the world is theirs, that Leah is theirs, but now I'm ready for them. I never ask them, Tell me. Tell me about Leah. I thank them. I say, thank you, thank you for calling. And still I call her time after time, relentless. My calls go straight to voice mail.

Our daughter's room remains hers, as if she were expected to return; our lives are the sum of these situations, what there is and what there isn't. We are the parents of a missing person, but

COYOTES BY THE ELIOT HOUSE

Tom I've a question and all I have is a question.
There are lots of coyotes near this old house you lived in.
I didn't expect them here in the green Northeast.
Figured them things of rocks and the high sierras.
There goes another one bounding for the bushes.
First time, I thought: that's a dog acting really strangely.
But it didn't turn back for approval or get distracted
by an insignificant thing, as a dog will tend to.
No it was gone by now, it had made me nervous.
They're the size of a family dog but they're on their own.
Folks round here reassure me there's no danger
unless you attack their cubs so I'll shelve my plan
to attack their cubs, chrissakes. Tom, Tom,
apologies, I have loved my time in your house.

Last night at dinner we heard a siren wailing
off in the town and all of them started howling,
all the coyotes for miles around in the bushes
aghast, alerting their young, alarming their old,
rising and heightening, matching its pitch and power,
one near the blue spinning light in its thrall, uniquely
bound by this unpredicted visitation.
Then after the siren faded they packed it in.
What do they think that is, that demands of them
and gets of them their love or their terror or both?
What do we poets do when we know it's nothing?
Not *for* them or against them or about them.
Tom, I had to be here to ask that question.
I expect I'll have to be gone before you answer.

—*Glyn Maxwell*

the kind no one around us can understand, not even us; and in this darkness we fumble.

•

When Meir first tells me about the muscle pain plaguing him, I already know. I have been awakened more than once by the sound of suppressed groans. I accompany him to our G.P., after which he's rushed to a series of scans. Results, consultations. Luck is not on our side. Without our knowing, the disease and Meir have been cohabiting for too long to split up.

Every time one of Leah's emissaries calls—always me, my phone—it takes me hours to get my thoughts straight, which can explain why I find it hard to say, exactly, when it dawns on me that it might all be a charade, that none of these men ever scaled up or down receptionless mountains with her, slept beside my daughter in forests, hiked with her to remote villages; that while they were on the phone with me she was somewhere nearby, perhaps even right beside them, listening in, gesturing to them to hurry up, and the next time one of them calls I say, If you happen to run into her again, if you go back up the mountain, if you cross her path—you might just cross paths—tell her that her father is very sick.

She appears at the door less than a week later.

The three of us are together again, even if Meir is already not himself, either in appearance or in speech. He has drifted away from his essence, but is possibly more present than ever—it's hard to pin down the thing that happens to someone in his final days, whether he dwindles away or purifies.

Our nomad daughter is home. She is not sun-scorched. Nor are her calves muscular, or her hair an overgrown fern. She's not too thin—if anything, has put on weight—and her clothes, despite the multitude of colors and layers, are clean and kempt. I flash back to the summer between eleventh and twelfth grades, when she waited tables at the café in the local shopping mall. As if overnight, she learned to tuck her shirt into her skirt, chew bubble gum undetected, avoid leaning against the tables. She learned the proper way to pull her hair into a ponytail and not to be too cozy with the customers.

"Mom."

She stands at the door. I reach out and touch her hair.

Affectionately, affectionately I used to ask her, When was the last time you washed your hair? It's due for a washing. Affectionately, I used to slide my hand over the heavy waterfall of her hair and say, We'll end up finding bird's nests in there, maybe a kitten, an antique Chinese coin.

"Liki?"

I burst into tears and embrace her, and she wraps her arms around me and says, "No, don't cry," and already it is hard to believe that she has been away for two years, that I have been in such agony.

I lead her into Meir's room. Our room. I worry that he'll become too excited, worry for his heart, but his face lights up with recognition and understanding, as if he had been expecting her, and in his new, drug-slurred voice he says, "Leah'le."

Gingerly, she leans over him, and his skeletal hands slowly climb up her back. She whispers something in his ear and they both laugh.

Meir dies in the hospital five days later. Each day we sit by him, holding his hands from either side of the bed. On his final day, the intuition of the doctors prompts them to tell us, Stay. Don't go. Wait.

It's hard to find words for the moment it occurs; it is as otherworldly as it is prosaic. The plainness of the deceased's feet.

•

Five weeks after Meir's death I drove Leah to the airport. I knew exactly what



"Tell me about a time a job interviewer tried to throw you a curveball, and how you handled it."

I was going to say, already had the words lined up in my head. Forty minutes in the car with no escape hatch. Our rides to the airport used to be the kickoff to an adventure waiting to unfold, and it felt the same now. Leah got in the car, placed her coat on her lap and her hands over the coat. I turned on the radio. After a few moments, she reached out to turn it down, then lowered her hand to her side. I waited a while before cranking it back up and only much later, when we stopped at the airport terminal, did I put my hand on hers. It wasn't too late. I pulled into the drop-off zone and we got out of the car. I knew that I was going to talk, that I couldn't not talk. I heaved her giant duffelbag out of the trunk. A car came up behind ours, waiting for us to clear the lane, and I rushed back into the driver's seat. "Come here," I called out to her from behind the wheel, and she bent over the open passenger window and poked her head in. I leaned across the seat, cupped her face with both my hands, and kissed her on the mouth the way we used to. A curt honk sounding behind us quickly broke us apart. I could see her in the side mirror, standing there, watching as I drove away.

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When he was already very sick, Meir suffered terribly from the cold. But with the windows closed from morning to night the room was stifling, so in the early evening I would cover him with three blankets, open the windows, and lie beside him in the dark. We would talk for a bit. He was tired and weak and so was I. And still, one night he said, "I thought that after you gave birth I would have to have you committed."

I listened breathlessly. The months of pregnancy with Leah were a horror ripening from within—the thing that was growing inside me, forming from my flesh, was also entirely sealed off and subjugating.

"I saw how you were holding on," Meir continued. "I knew you were holding on by your fingertips. I remember thinking, She'll have the baby and then fall to pieces. She'll never be able to take care of anyone, ever. I thought that after the birth I'd have to raise the baby on my own and also take care of you."

It hurt that he would say this. The words he chose.

"You were off your rocker," he said. "But then Leah was born and a miracle happened. She was born—and you came back. Just like that, you were your old self again. You loved her so much and took care of her, everything seemed so simple. I couldn't believe it."

•

My neighbor Ora knocked on the door. She'd been away for two weeks, on a guided tour to Europe, suddenly I didn't remember just where. France, Holland, maybe Belgium. She looked fabulous, radiant in her new haircut. She said, "Make me coffee, you won't believe the story I have for you."

I didn't like it when she fizzed like that. Talked too loud. But I wanted to hear. We had become closer since Meir's death. It wasn't a friendship—I kept away from those. By then I had already cut off most of my ties, didn't want to tell anyone about Leah, that she was avoiding me, that in recent years I called her only when I could endure the coldness of her voice. It embarrassed me.

It was a marvellous trip, Ora said. A good group, everyone always on time, except for one, a widower, not that old. Raphael. Rafi. So annoying. And on the bus he always insisted on sitting by the window, said he had motion sickness. And the thing that happened happened in Groningen—a nice city, she said, quaint, all of Holland is. After a visit to the maritime museum, they'd dispersed for thirty minutes of free time to explore the town before reconvening back at the bus, everyone but Rafi, again. Waiting for Rafi. Story of our lives. And she, Ora, took her seat on the bus and looked out the window. Two cute girls were sitting by a fountain, and she thought, What adorable girls, where's their mother? And then she saw the mother on a bench nearby, keeping an eye on them.

"I looked at her," Ora said, "squinted. I couldn't believe it."

My grip on my coffee mug tightened. Over the past months I'd spoken with Leah only once. She was in Thailand, she said, working on a small organic farm. Mostly cooking, sometimes

cleaning. I didn't ask questions, I let her speak, didn't want to poke holes in her story. Now I tried to draw the mug to my lips, but my hands trembled.

"I thought I was going nuts," Ora continued. "I looked at her. Leah? Yoella's Leah? What is she doing here? Can't be. Is that Leah? She looks just like her, her doppelgänger! I got up, told the driver, 'Wait for me, I'll be back in a sec.' I got off the bus and started walking toward them, I don't know why, what I was thinking. I was thinking, Maybe I'll take a photo of her for Yoella. Yoella has got to see this, she's got to!"

Ora paused for a moment, ran out of breath, dizzy with excitement.

"They were a hundred feet away from me," she said. "I didn't know what to do. Is that Leah? But Leah is in India, in Thailand, I don't remember where, she's in all kinds of places, but here? I didn't know if I should wave at her, maybe call out her name? She'll think I'm crazy. I waved. She didn't wave back. I wanted to shout, Leah! Leah! But I was too embarrassed. It wasn't her, it can't be. But a dead ringer! And then Rafi came running out of nowhere, and the bus driver called me back, and the woman, Leah, she approached the girls and took their hands and the three of them started walking away. I'm so sorry I didn't take her picture. You wouldn't believe it, Yoella."

I smiled. I managed to. I said, "That's some story."

I can't recount the next few days. What I can say is that I now knew where to look for my daughter, and I found her easily. She was living in Groningen. Married to Johan Dappersma. They had two daughters, Lotte and Sanne. It would be a few months before I found a photo of Lotte online. I would find a photo of Johan, too. And one of the two girls.

•

Meir was forty-six the summer I first saw him, at the supermarket. A few weeks later he showed up at the studio, after which we never parted. But there were times when I left the house in tears, got into my car, started the engine, and drove around town for thirty minutes, an hour, two, until he called and, with soft words, steered me back.

In all our years together I burdened Leah with my sadness only once. I couldn't shake the feeling that Meir was about to leave me, and I wouldn't sleep next to him. At night I would crawl into my daughter's bed; she would turn to me right away, wrapping herself around me with the perfect warmth of her body that offered its softness and asked for nothing in return. In Meir's arms I was always restless, whereas twelve-year-old Leah held me as if she knew all there was to know about human touch and how to calm me completely. That week I fell asleep beside her night after night; she was the cure for seven nights straight. We pulled through—I never found out what put an end to the affair, knew only that it was a student of his, perhaps I had seen her on campus, from afar, alone, and knew it was she. I knew as people often know. It was over, and I returned to our bed.

The following summer I got pregnant. I was forty-three years old, Meir fifty-nine, and I told him with an excitement tinged with trepidation. I didn't know what his eyes were going to deliver until they delivered it. And so I terminated the pregnancy. I wasn't angry; I was relieved. Actually, I was angry.

But if I left Meir, what would I do with Leah? With whom would I love her? With whom would I talk about her? To whom would I send the photos I'd taken of her? Share the funny things she said? Only Meir loved her as much as I did, was as interested in her as I was. Only in his eyes could I see the light snap on at the mention of her name. I couldn't leave him. I knew that with Leah I would never be lonely again, and yet I still needed Meir, to see us.



•

After my first trip to Groningen, I went back. Went back twice. But I couldn't bring myself to go near the window again. I stopped at the end of the street and turned around.

I knew where Johan worked. I wrote to him twice, to no avail, but I could find him and stand in front of him. I could leave him no choice. Who can hide in this day and age? No one. Especially if someone is looking for them.

My daughter's husband taught at a theatre school by the east harbor, the Lancering Theatre Academy, a jutting building of concrete and glass that conformed perfectly to the ashy sky above it. I sat down at the café across the street. Every so often the Lancering students crossed the street and entered the café, sticking to the cheapest items on the menu. Espresso, soda, pastries. People can be so young sometimes. A boy with a nose ring and pink hair belted out a song while waiting in line at the counter, and I thought, How nonchalantly the future spreads out its nets, you don't realize it until it's too late. Three girls a table over got up to leave and hugged one another with willowy delight. Was that how Leah conducted herself in these parts? As if the world were hers for the taking? Hugging everyone and everything? She had been Johan's student, and when I found her on the Internet under her new name I also found a photo of Johan that she had posted seven years earlier, with "my teacher" in Dutch written under it. And yet I still could not picture her sitting in this café, laughing carelessly, undoing her ponytail, flipping her hair and pulling it back into a ponytail like someone who knows herself inside and out. Johan was fifteen years her senior, perhaps even older. I understood what he had to offer her.

When he finally exited the building, he was alone. Lanky in a winter jacket, carrying a leather briefcase, like a country doctor in a play. I recognized him easily. I had studied his photographs, but I had not realized how tall he was. I'd paid the bill in advance so that I could get up and leave at any moment, and now was that moment. I jumped out of my seat and crossed the street. He rounded the corner onto the main avenue, and I followed him. We walked. I had done this before, years ago. For the duration of one dreadful winter, I had trailed Meir undetected; I got good

at it. Johan darted down the street and came to a halt at the bus stop, where he placed his briefcase on the curb and searched his pockets. I didn't slow my steps, I rushed along, waiting for my mind to shut down so I could move from thinking to doing, and I was already in close range when he glanced up at me and I kept going, passed him, was gone. But the notion that he didn't recognize me as Leah's mother was suddenly unfathomable, ludicrous. I wasn't just another person passing by. I was the mother, his daughters were my granddaughters, we were linked by a bond that could not fail to signify something. I had sent him letters, he knew I existed, knew I was looking for him, and yet when he saw me his expression remained blank. To him I was just a woman going about her business.

That night, when darkness descended, I was back in their neighborhood, wandering the streets surrounding their house. The ice-cream shop, the pharmacy, the playground. These were the slides my granddaughters slid down. This was the bench my daughter sat on while watching them. Here were the swings that propelled them upward, the sand that poured into their shoes. From this merry-go-round Lotte once fell and bumped her head and was rushed to the hospital. Such things happen. The neighborhood was an old one, and it seemed peaceful, but nocturnal men might still prowl it, and I had to trust that my daughter knew how to keep her daughters safe.

•

When I first started searching for my granddaughters I stayed up whole nights. I was hoping I would find them. I was hoping I wouldn't. I understood the violation. I went to the same Web sites again and again, clicked the same records and the same photos, searched every corner as if some old detail might suddenly present itself in a new light. I expected to find them at any given moment, and I did. Lotte Dappersma. Sanne Dappersma. They were five and six, and slowly growing up. Six and seven. Students at De Lange Brug, the long bridge. Students at the local conservatory. Lotte for guitar, Sanne for violin. Unearthing Johan's Instagram account coincided with a case of bronchitis that kept me bedridden for days. The minutiae of their lives became mine for the taking: the pattern of the curtains in the girls' bedrooms, the dome of light cast by Lotte's reading lamp, Sanne's loopy handwriting and penchant for green hearts. Sanne appeared more lighthearted than her sister, slier. A mischievous face. I thought that with her it would be easier down the road. Neither of them resembled Leah in the slightest, not in their looks, not in their expressions, not in the type of woman tucked inside them, lying in wait for the future. Small straight noses. The golden flour hair that fluttered about their heads, alive like a puppy, stirring in me the desire to sniff it and dip my hand in it. And still I did not lose my mind. Now that I was in possession of my granddaughters in photographic form, I withstood the urge. I had already tracked down several of Lotte's classmates and a few parents—I knew what I was doing. I had also located two of her friends from the conservatory. The mother of one of the girls, Maria Koch, posted a short video from the end-of-year recital. The camera lens was fixed on Maria, a small, sallow girl. I watched the first few seconds, then paused to compose myself. A whole hour went by before I watched the rest of it. Next to Maria, on the edge of the screen, was Lotte.

A few weeks later, as if I had gone entirely unnoticed, was not even on their radar, as if my tracking them down and watching them from afar were an impossibility, Johan posted a video from Sanne's birthday party, and there was everyone. Lotte, Sanne, Johan, Leah. Eleven seconds. I want to say that seeing my granddaughters in motion was more than I could bear. I am saying that I was crushed by the sight of Leah bunching Sanne's hair into her hands as she leaned forward to blow out the birthday candles. And just like that, they were her daughters in every way; the resemblance, which lay below their features, in deeper strata, triggered a tremor of recognition that slammed me to the ground. Days of high fever, fitful sleep, and jumbled thoughts ensued. Had she found God, had she joined a cult, had she surrendered to a force greater than herself . . . But she remained Leah, she was Leah, and she no longer wanted to be my daughter.

•

After Meir's death, after the shivah and the thirty-day mourning period, on the night before she was about to set off again, the two of us sat down at the dinner table. All those years she had wanted us to eat together as a family, wanted Meir to sit with us, too, wanted Friday-night dinners, and we tried, we'd sit down together, but we didn't understand how to generate the mass. Maybe three is just too few for a family. Meir would have the TV on in the background. "It's the weekend news." But he had no interest in the news, and we'd eat quickly and get up, disbanding with lighthearted banter; in small families, one member's silence is enough to spoil everything.

I'd made us omelettes and salad. Brewed herbal tea in a teapot. Toasted the bread she liked. Meir had been dead for five weeks now, thirty-five days had gone by since the funeral. Meir was dead. Leah understood perfectly, perhaps faster than me. It was now just the two of us.

During those weeks she'd left the house very little. Two or three times she visited my mother, and once drove into town to run errands.

I asked if she'd like more tea. Enough sugar? She smiled gently. Treated me softly. She spoke as little as possible during those days. Later I thought it was to protect me.

I said, "I'm so sorry."

She levelled her gaze at me.

"I didn't know how," I said. "I didn't know how to help you."

She looked at me a moment longer before bringing the mug to her lips again, and I thought, She understands what I'm saying.

"Are you all packed?" I blurted out. "Or can I help you pack?"

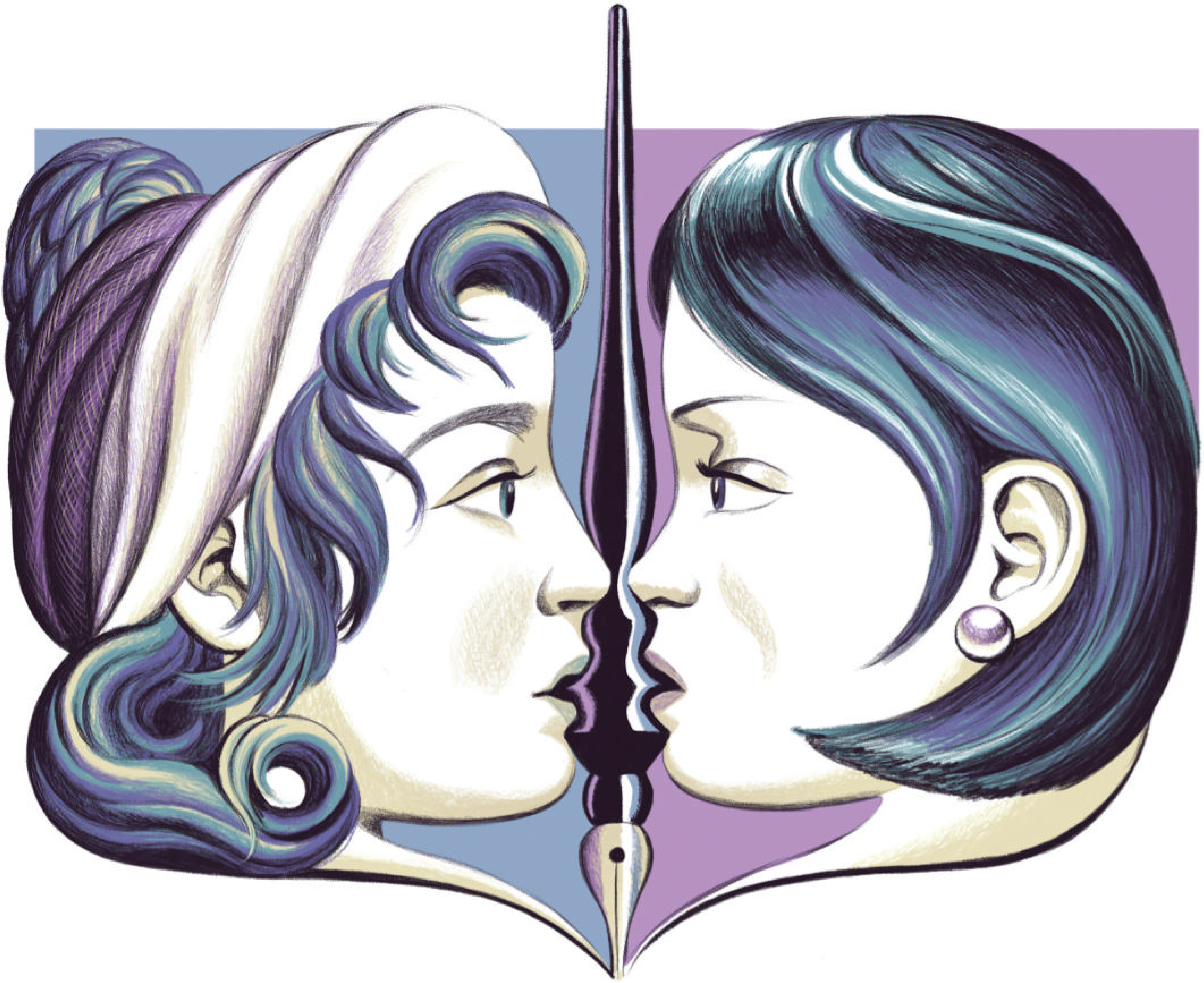
"Thanks," she said, "it's all right." She was always a gentle child, a gentle young woman. "It's O.K., Mom."

Early the following morning I drove her to the airport. The next time I saw her, she was already twenty-eight years old and I was looking in her window in Groningen, from across the street. ♦

(Translated, from the Hebrew, by Daniella Zamir.)

NEWYORKER.COM
Hila Blum on power and parenthood.

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

LETTING GO

What women writers give up in order to come into their own.

BY LAUREN MICHELE JACKSON

When the critic Joanna Biggs was thirty-two, her mother, still in her fifties, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. "Everything wobbled," she recalls. Biggs was married but not sure she wanted to be, suddenly distrustful of the neat, conventional course—marriage, kids, burbs—plotted out since she met her husband, at nineteen. It was as though the disease's rending of a maternal bond had severed her contract with the prescribed feminine itinerary. Soon enough, she and her husband were seeing other people; then he moved out, and she began making pilgrimages to visit Mary Wollstonecraft's grave.

The unassuming resting place of the long-deceased author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," tucked behind the bustle of King's Cross station, had a sort of aura. The daughter whom Wollstonecraft, stricken in childbirth, never got to know—the daughter who became famous as the creator of "Frankenstein"—learned her letters by tracing their shared name on her

Their stories—lived and invented—form a dialogue across centuries, renegotiating the terms of womanhood.

ILLUSTRATION BY JILLIAN TAMAKI

mother's headstone, and later pronounced the budding love between her and a then married poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, at the site. "When I thought about the place, I thought of death and sex and possibility," Biggs writes. On one occasion, she brought a lover, without explaining her reason for the visit. She sensed that Wollstonecraft, who knew something of death, sex, possibility, would have understood.

Divorce, not unlike adolescence, leaves its subjects adrift in the caprices of a phase, alert to guidance drawn from lives already lived. Biggs grasped emancipation "as a seventeen-year-old might: hard and fast and negronied and wild." She undertook a furious search for an alternative to her failed marriage plot. Her questions, previously quieted by wedlock, now spilled out:

> Was domesticity a trap? What was worth living for if you lost faith in the traditional goals of a woman's life? What was worth living for at all—what degree of unhappiness, lostness, chaos was bearable? Could I even do this without my mother beside me?

"A Life of One's Own: Nine Women Writers Begin Again" (Ecco) is a memoir that wends its way through chapter-length biographies of authors whose lives asked and answered such questions. The title, of course, riffs on Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay "A Room of One's Own," and returns us to its lesson in the material needs of writing, seldom afforded women. But Woolf's sense of ancestral indebtedness is the book's motivating force. "Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney," Woolf wrote. "All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn." Or, as Biggs writes, a solidarity of women's voices "must accumulate before a single one can speak."

Biggs hails her guides in mononyms, like intimates or pop stars: Mary, George, Zora, Virginia, Simone, Sylvia, Toni, Elena. Within their differences (of eras, means, race), each charged herself with writing while woman, thus renegotiating their relationship to marriage and child rearing, endeavors long considered definitive of womanhood. Their lives supplied Biggs a measure of clarity in mapping a new life for herself; their voices helped her, as a writer, to find a new voice.

Biggs, now a senior editor at *Harper's*, is the author of an earlier book, "All Day Long," from 2015, which presented a very different set of case studies, attempting a taxonomy of the working life of present-day Britons. Her literary essays, introspective visitations of classic and recent books, appear in the kinds of places to which any critic aspires. But, when her world started to wobble, she felt that she was jumping from genre to genre without working out what she most wanted to say. "A Life of One's Own" is itself the writerly achievement she had hoped for, which means that the larger story of her absorbing, eccentric book is the story of how she came to write it. "This book bears the traces of their struggles as well as my own—and some of the things we all found that help," Biggs writes of her subjects. Their stories, the ones they lived and the ones they invented, are complexly ambivalent, like all good stories; they withhold the assurances of a blueprint. But Biggs has been a resourceful reader, who finds what will sustain her.

Readiness is all. Abed with tonsillitis when she was fourteen or so, Biggs was given a copy of George Eliot's "The Mill on the Floss" by her mother. She set the book aside, put off by its many thin pages and small type, the curly-haired pale girl with the pink lips on its cover. Her mother was the reader of the family; Biggs wasn't yet reading very seriously, apart from the usual age-appropriate genre fare. Neither of her parents was a college grad, but, when Oxford materialized as a goal, Biggs, now in her late teens, returned to Eliot, exchanging pocket money for scholastic seriousness by way of "Middlemarch." Woolf had heralded it as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people," and Biggs hoped to impress Oxford's gatekeeping dons with her ability to discuss this grown-up work.



Yet the novel turned out to be far juicier than its repute suggested. Biggs tore through it as if it were a potboiler, flipping pages in the bath and updating her mother on the latest turn of events. When the admission interview came, she confided to the Oxford tutor her hopes for Dorothea's love life.

The university extended an acceptance, but the coveted envelope seldom guarantees the affirmation of one's academic mettle. A grammar-school girl, she remembers a male classmate, fresh from Eton, who whipped out terms like "anaphora" and "zeugma" at will. His prowess bespoke a doctrine—running contrary to Biggs's instinctual reading practice—"that books were about other books, that they were not about life."

It was at Oxford that Biggs first read Wollstonecraft and her "Vindication of the Rights of Woman"; she was taken by its insistence that society ought to "consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties." Here was a formidable figure, Biggs thought, and she braved the work's fusty idiom: "I longed to keep up with her, even if I had to do it with the shorter *OED* at my elbow." And yet, Biggs writes, "It wasn't clear to me when I was younger how hard she had pushed herself."

She learned this in time. Wollstonecraft, born in 1759 in East London, was the eldest daughter among seven children, a familial placement distinguished then, as it is now, by a compulsory maternalism. She tried to intervene when her father beat her mother, Biggs tells us, and was responsible for the care of her younger siblings. After nursing her mother, starting a school, and working as a governess, she resolved, at twenty-eight, to become, as she wrote in a letter to a sister, "the first of a new genus," a woman making a living by her pen.

She found friendship and work with a radical publisher in London, came out with a conduct guide for girls and young women in 1787, and, the next year, a novel, "Mary," about a woman, forced into a loveless marriage, who sustains herself through romantic friendships. She fell in love with the painter Henry Fuseli, eighteen years her senior and

married; she was smitten by what she described as his "grandeur of soul." But Fuseli's wife did not respond well to Wollstonecraft's proposal that they form a ménage à trois. In 1792, now thirty-two, she published "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." In the ensuing years, Biggs writes, "she offered up her heart ecstatically, carelessly." A child was born; suicide was attempted. Yet the same intensity of emotion stirred her pen, and, recovering in Scandinavia, she wrote another book, an epistolary travelogue, where she allowed her writing to "flow unrestrained."

More calamity followed—including another attempt at suicide, in which she soaked her clothes in the rain and then plunged into the Thames—but Biggs is relieved that Wollstonecraft found genuine companionship at last. The radical reformer William Godwin read her travelogue, and the two enjoyed something more measured than passion: what Wollstonecraft called "a sublime tranquility." They wed, in March of 1797, despite mutual misgivings about the institution of marriage, and Wollstonecraft began work on another novel. Late that August, she had a daughter and, suffering complications during the birth, died, at the age of thirty-eight.

Her afterlife was scarcely less tempestuous than her life. A candid memoir that Godwin published about her made her a figure of scandal, inadvertently blighting her reputation for generations. Nor has the air of contention around her entirely vanished. Three years ago, a memorial sculpture appeared in a London green: a tall, silver, truncal swirl topped by a nude female figurine. Reception was unkind, fixating on the figurine and its perceived disservice to Wollstonecraft's philosophy. When Biggs came to lay eyes on the thing, she was, instead, disappointed by the words etched on its plinth: "I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves." The shorn-off selection is "a little unambitious," Biggs writes. It's as if the memorialists were afraid of their subject.



"Do you want to try and put the air-conditioner in together or stay married?"

You had to be a little brave to wrangle with Wollstonecraft's legacy, and, as Biggs makes clear, Marian Evans was more than a little brave. In an 1855 review, she defended Wollstonecraft from the "vague prejudice against the *Rights of Woman* as in some way or other a reprehensible book." In 1871, while working on "Middlemarch," she wrote to a friend about Wollstonecraft's leaping into the Thames. (Biggs does not mention that Evans later used a version of the episode in her novel "Daniel Deronda.")

When Marian Evans invoked "The Rights of Woman," her nom de plume, George Eliot, was on the cusp of invention, though the name Marian, too, was something of shifted truth. Born Mary Anne, in 1819, the pious youngest child of an estate manager and his wife, she found herself slipping away from her creedal attachments by the age of twenty-three, and becoming enfolded in a new community of writers and thinkers—among them Herbert Spencer, Harriet Martineau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. When, seven years later, she lost her father, she worried that she'd lost a bulwark against "becoming earthly sensual and devilish for want of that purifying restraining influence."

Biggs stresses the importance that Wollstonecraft's example had for Evans. How often, Biggs wonders, had she "smoothed the rough edges of Mary's life into a silky pebble-parable"? Like Wollstonecraft, Evans began as a reader for a publisher, and encountered an ill-chosen recipient of her profession of love (in Evans's case, Spencer). Like Wollstonecraft, Evans persisted, pleadingly, in the face of rejection. "I could gather courage to work and make life valuable, if only I had you near me," she wrote.

Sooner than Wollstonecraft, Evans found a soul mate, in George Henry Lewes, the unhappily married critic and co-editor of *The Leader*, a radical weekly. His adoration provided the security for

her to embark on a novel, and, unlike Wollstonecraft, she eventually saw the renown of her work overtake the scandalous irregularities of her romance. Lewes and Evans read together in the evening, and exchanged drafts; he sometimes responded to her work with kisses rather than editorial suggestions. Lewes barred negative reviews from their threshold and, from around the Continent, they celebrated the publication of her novels. For a period when Lewes fell ill, Biggs tells us, Evans helped out with his writing assignments, "a sign that they now saw their lives—literary and otherwise—as shared, or as Evans would put it later in her diary, doubled." Biggs reflects that there is no name for this most fortifying relationship in Evans's life, "a marriage that isn't quite one." If a sexless union is a *mariage blanc*, perhaps theirs could be termed a *mariage rose*, Biggs decides. One does not need a term in order to yearn, but it helps.

When Lewes died, in 1878, Evans was devastated, joined in her grief by their friend John Cross, a banker twenty years her junior. A year later, he proposed marriage to Evans, who was then a frail sexagenarian; they were wed in 1880. Biggs can't help finding something "glorious" in Evans's being adored by a younger man, and makes little of Cross's seeming effort to drown himself during their honeymoon—he jumped from their hotel room in Venice into the Grand Canal, as if intent on meeting the fate of the villainous "Daniel Deronda" character Grandcourt. She commends Cross, too, for writing an "important early biography of Eliot."

It's possible that Biggs has smoothed certain rough edges of Evans's life into a pebble-parable. In truth, the tenor of Cross's letters to her was one of devotion, not desire; the marriage (which the lifelong bachelor called "a high calling") did appear to have been more *blanc* than *rose*. And Cross's biography was as ruinous to her reputation as Godwin's was to Wollstonecraft's, albeit in the opposite direction. Cross, carefully removing anything sly or spicy from her letters, which he quoted extensively, turned her into a stuffy, sententious Victorian sage of the sort that was anathema to sophisticates.

That's not a misapprehension anyone would have had about Zora Neale Hurston. Her 1937 novel, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," arrived in Biggs's life as another gift from her mother, in an edition that was itself prefaced by a story of maternal recommendation. In an introduction to the novel, Zadie Smith recalled how suspicious she was when she was fourteen and her mother gave her a copy of it: "I disliked the idea of 'identifying' with the fiction I read." Like Smith, Biggs has worked through such anxieties. "I used to want desperately to be a 'proper' critic, to be taken seriously, to have a full command of history and theory, but I don't want that anymore," Biggs declares. "I don't want to 'admire' writing for its erudition, I want to be changed by it. I want to know what it's like to be someone else."

In Biggs's telling, Hurston's itinerant flamboyance is a complement to the carnal rebellion of Janie, the heroine of "Their Eyes Were Watching God." The two Southern women spur Biggs toward reclamation of "that blossomy, foamy feeling." In the luxuriance of identification, she trips over details. And so she repeatedly proclaims Hurston the first professional Black woman writer (an assertion that would have come as a surprise to Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, say, or Pauline Hopkins); she also writes that Hurston went to Barnard to study anthropology under Alain Locke. (Locke, whose Ph.D. was in philosophy, did not teach anthropology and did not teach at Barnard.) But feeling, not fact, is what Biggs is after here. Janie, following two miserable marriages to respectable men, finds erotic liberation with a handsome drifter; Biggs, in turn, thinks about the sensual joy she experiences with "men who aren't my husband, or who don't want to be"—staying up all night listening to music and having sex, drinking prosecco in bed, dancing naked in heels—and wonders, "Can you make a life from this?"

She finds a productive form of incandescence in her chapter on Woolf, whom she reads with deep affection—an affection she hasn't always thought would be reciprocated. (Turning the pages of "To the Lighthouse" as a sixteen-year-old, she imagines that Woolf might have looked down on her as a "provincial schoolgirl.") After college, Biggs got a job at a book publisher—Bloomsbury, aptly enough—and tried to make her way through Woolf's novels in chronological order, washing out after "Mrs. Dalloway." Years later, when—fleeing her divorce, her mother's fading—she moved to New York and got a job at *Harper's*, she tried again, while taking the subway from Brooklyn to Manhattan. She alights on Woolf's need for the sense of newness, her despair when she thinks it may never return.

Woolf was wary of the wedded life. "On the threshold of convention," Biggs writes, "she hesitated, hoping that in this interzone between marriage and not-marriage, they could make something new out of the institution: a modernist marriage." But Biggs admires the way that Leonard Woolf, like George Lewes, protected and buoyed his beloved's vocation—especially since, as Biggs explains, "My own experience of



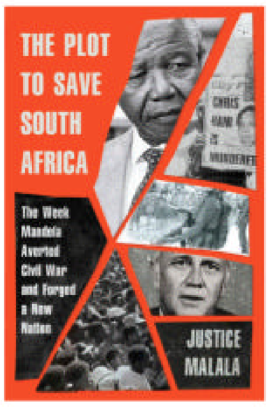
being married to another writer was full of disguised envy." Woolf was in her forties when she met and fell in love with the more glamorous and established Vita Sackville-West, and her love flourished in her fiction. Even so, as Biggs says, the center of gravity of her life remained with Leonard. In the end, of course, his vigilant devotion could not stave off the devastations of depression, and the drowning death that Wollstonecraft had tried to arrange.

Biggs is an attentive reader of Woolf, and Mrs. Ramsay's maternal role in "To the Lighthouse" naturally puts her in mind of her own mother. But Woolf's greatest value for her is as an exemplar of reading. Her essays "offer thoughts about what books did for her." More than that, Biggs says, "there is a sense when you read Woolf's essays that she thinks literary criticism would at its best be something like that, a conversation between like-minded and not-so-like-minded people over time. Almost by evolution, the conversation would refine what books are really for."

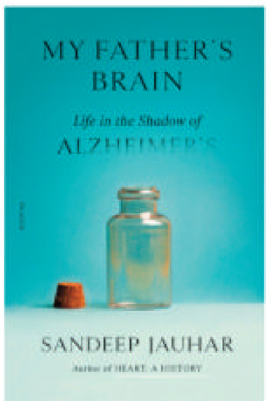
It might not refine what marriage is really for. Biggs writes about women who have been married to men; convention, for them, is less flouted than managed. Woolf, like Wollstonecraft and Evans, entered marriage from a reluctant posture; Hurston married several times, never settling long enough to take another's name. But though the specific interior of Biggs's marriage remains largely veiled throughout the book, the author tells us that her vision of wedded life was modelled on Sylvia Plath's. Indeed, the first four words of "Ariel," the manuscript Plath left behind, were engraved inside Biggs's wedding band: "love set you going."

The broad outlines of Plath's story might advise avoidance, rather than emulation. But Biggs contends that "The Bell Jar" and "Ariel" are "as much about rising again as they are about oblivion." And people familiar with the more intimate beats of Plath's story, documented in journal entries and correspondence, will understand the appeal of entwining with another person the way Plath did. At a party in Cambridge one February evening in 1956, Plath—a twenty-three-year-old American studying English there on a Fulbright—met a "big,

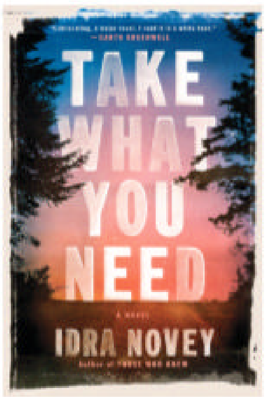
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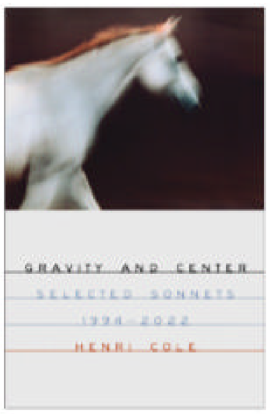
The Plot to Save South Africa, *by Justice Malala (Simon & Schuster).* On Easter weekend, 1993, Chris Hani—an A.N.C. commander seen as Nelson Mandela's likely successor—was assassinated by two white nationalists. Protests and violence followed, threatening to derail ongoing negotiations to end apartheid. This account re-creates the delicate process by which negotiators—Mandela and Cyril Ramaphosa on one side, F. W. de Klerk and Roelf Meyer on the other—struggled to keep the people's reactions in check and pull the country back from the brink of civil war. Malala also probes the persistent conspiracy theories surrounding Hani's death. Conceding that these theories may never be proved or disproved, he nonetheless stresses the way that a killing intended to ignite a race war ended up accelerating democratization.



My Father's Brain, *by Sandeep Jauhar (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* Spanning seven years, this incisive memoir relates the decline of the author's father, an eminent agricultural scientist, after a dementia diagnosis. Sandeep, a physician, examines the history and science of dementia and the ethics of making decisions on behalf of the cognitively impaired. He is clear-eyed about his and his siblings' shortcomings and about the social factors that exacerbate the challenges of helping the elderly. These include cultural biases against those perceived as not rational and Western individualism, which discourages intergenerational homes and thereby increases the obstacles to collective caretaking.



Take What You Need, *by Idra Novey (Viking).* A delicate meditation on art, family, and ugliness, this novel unfolds in chapters that alternate between the perspectives of Jean, an elderly sculptor living in the Alleghenies, and her estranged stepdaughter, Leah, who, after Jean's death, comes to collect the sculptures that constitute her inheritance. These works, towers of welded scrap metal that Jean calls "manglements," have a familial aspect: Jean learned to weld from her father, and the metal comes from her cousin's scrap shop. The characters dwell not only on the difficulties that arise in family life but also on the ways in which such difficulties can't be separated from love. Jean recalls that, when she read Leah "Little Red Riding Hood," the child wanted "no confusion about whether I was speaking as the wolf or the grandma."



Gravity and Center, *by Henri Cole (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* This volume of sonnets by one of the form's most distinctive practitioners calibrates tensions between mind and body, nature and culture, self and society, freedom and restraint. Cole eschews fixed metrical and rhyme schemes but retains the sonnet's essential sense of rigor and compression, the drama that emerges from its "little fractures and leaps and resolutions." His approach, which bears the influence of French and Japanese lyric traditions, combines a surrealistic idiom with an enigmatic emotional intensity; the poems feel at once delphic and deeply personal, mapping the thin and porous membrane between their author's inner and outer worlds.

dark, hunky boy," a poet named Ted Hughes. "I have never known anything like it," Plath wrote during their courtship. "I can use *all* my knowing and laughing and force and writing to the hilt all the time, everything." They married that summer and Plath seemed to find, in wedlock, what Eliot found outside it. "Theirs was a fusional marriage: emotionally, physically, editorially," Biggs writes. Plath called their first child, Frieda, born months before the release of "The Colossus," a "living mutually-created poem."

In 1962, Plath gave birth to a son, and learned that her husband might have been having an affair; Hughes, though denying the infidelity, decamped. Plath's letters to her psychiatrist vacillate between despair ("I feel ugly and a fool, when I have so long felt beautiful & capable of being a wonderful happy mother and wife and writing novels for fun & money") and something more righteous ("I'm damned if I am going to be a Wife-mother every minute of the day"). Biggs's husband wasn't a cheat, so far as we know, but the breach in their marriage takes on related resonances: "He imagined me pushing a pram in red lipstick, while I . . . imagined negotiating for time to write and only managing a sentence before he came home from the park with the stroller: neither baby nor book."

Biggs's husband is given privacy in her narrative, but tidbits suggest that his story follows a familiar path; he was married again and with children in the time it took Biggs to determine her terms of self-discovery. "I had married believing in an intellectual partnership as much as a romantic one, I had been disappointed, I had divorced," Biggs summarizes. A friend puts it this way: "It's your idea of marriage that suffered, I think." She yearns not for her ex-husband but for some form of attachment, which may or may not resemble marriage. "During my divorce," she writes, "I remember thinking: am I victim or beneficiary? Sylvia's late poems suggest: always both."

With respect to children, none of Biggs's guides diverge from the expected narrative so much as Toni Morrison, who called motherhood "the most liberating thing that ever happened to me." In a 1987 interview with *Essence*, Morrison, who produced "The Bluest Eye" and "Sula" when she was a single mother with a day job as a book editor, is asked the usual question: How does she find the time? Morrison says that hers is an "ad hoc" life, filled with the joys and troubles of writing, and the needs of her boys. "I couldn't write the way writers write, I had to write the way a woman with children writes," she says. "I would never tell a child, 'Leave me alone, I'm writing.' That doesn't mean anything to a child. What they deserve and need, in-house, is a mother. They do not need and cannot use a writer." This maternal Morrison seems to surprise Biggs, who once presumed that the Nobel laureate was "imperious."

Among single mothers, writing fills whatever hours it can find, the way gas fills the volume allotted to it. When Morrison wrote "Sula," she was in her late thirties, living in Queens, trading "time, food, money, clothes, laughter, memory—and daring" within a supportive community. Biggs seems drawn to that community, although, again, a sense of intimacy with an author does not always entail great intimacy with the details of her life and work. In Biggs's discussion of "The Bluest Eye," an observation made by the narrator, Claudia MacTeer, demurring from the culture's enthusiasm for blue eyes, is somehow attributed to Pecola Breedlove, who fatefully embraces it.

There are other downsides to identification as a mode of reading. "A Life of One's Own" swings between discovery and disappointment. Biggs is let down by the conservatism of Eliot, who preferred to keep mum on women's rights, and of Hurston, who was skeptical about integration. She finds Simone de Beauvoir's manipulative and abusive ways as a lover "difficult to forgive." Her authors' depressive episodes, taken personally, must be counselled through. She can seem at a loss when confronted with the sort of tragedy that cannot be transformed into a learning opportunity. "It's hard to write about the last twenty years of Zora's life," Biggs says. "Sad, meaningless things started happening to her." She would prefer to think of Janie's still bitter yet sweeter ending, and so concludes Hurston's chapter there. The essay on Plath imagines another ending for the writer entirely, weaving an alternate reality in which "Sylvia Plath didn't die at all" but lived on as a "badass divorcée" with thoughts on #MeToo.

"A Life of One's Own" sometimes suggests a model of the reader as a retail shopper, eagerly catching a glimpse of herself in a succession of mirrors as she updates her apparel. And yet Biggs's insistence that books are, or can be, for living has ample precedent, not only in Woolf but in such luminaries as Joan Didion, who observed that "the women we invent have changed the course of our lives as surely as the women we are." In fact, criticism has, at least since the nineteen-seventies, grown accustomed to accommodating the self-turned aspects of reading. The feminist forces that revived Mary Wollstonecraft and returned Zora Neale Hurston to print seldom think their authors dead. The past ten years alone have prompted such personal considerations of women creators as Deborah Nelson's "Tough Enough," Michelle Dean's "Sharp," and Alana Massey's "All the Lives I Want."

Joining this shelf, Biggs's book is fuelled by faith in the transmission of feeling as knowledge. George read Mary, Simone read George, and Toni, it seems, read everybody. "Underneath the homages and the flowers, the gentle ribbing and the over-identification," Biggs writes, "is an idea that instead of reading books in order to learn about history or science or cultural trends, women might draw benefit from thinking of themselves as being involved in a long conversation, in which they both listen and talk." If the personal is political, it must be literary, too.

Yet it's notable that all the authors she devotes chapters to were known for writing that took creative license with the workings of the world. There is, of course, another sort of yearning here; alongside Biggs's search for a way to be a woman apart from being a wife is her search for a way to be a writer apart from being a critic. On the evidence of "A Life of One's Own," she has found it. ♦

BOOKS

NO MORE RULES

The long afterlife of libertarianism.

BY BENJAMIN WALLACE-WELLS

Its rise and its fall have remade American politics twice over.



In 2001, the libertarian anti-tax activist Grover Norquist gave a memorable interview on NPR about his intentions. He said, "I don't want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I could drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub." Everything about the line was designed to provoke: the selection of a bookish and easily horrified audience, the unapologetic violence of "drag" and "drown," the porcelain specificity of "bathtub."

As propaganda, it worked magnificently. When I arrived in Washington, two years later, as a novice political reporter, the image still reverberated; to many it seemed a helpfully blunt depiction of what conservatives in power must really want. Republicans were preparing to privatize Social Security and Medicare, the President had campaigned on expanding school choice, and, everywhere you looked, public services were being reimagined as for-profit ones. Norquist himself—an intense, gleeful, ideological figure with the requisite libertarian beard—had managed to get more than two hundred members of Congress to sign a pledge never to raise taxes, for any reason at all. The Republicans of the George W. Bush era were generally smooth operators, having moved from a boomtime economy to the seat of an empire, confident, at every step, that they had the support of a popular majority. Their broader vision could be a little tricky for reporters to decode. Maybe Norquist was the one guy among them too weird to keep the plans for the revolution a secret.

But, as the Bush Administration unfolded, it became harder to see the Republicans as true believers. Government just didn't seem to be shrinking. On the contrary, all around us in Washington—in the majestic agency buildings along the Mall and in the rooftop bars crowded with management consultants flown in to aid in outsourcing, and especially in the vast, mirrored, gated complexes along the highway to Dulles, from which the war on terror was being coördinated and supplied—the government was very obviously growing.

However much the Republicans had wanted to downsize government, they turned out to want other things more—like operating an overseas empire and maintaining a winning political coalition. Bush's proposal for privatizing Medicare was watered down until, in 2003, it became an expensive drug benefit for seniors, evidently meant to help him win reëlection. After beating John Kerry, in 2004, Bush announced that Social Security reform would be one of his Administration's top priorities ("I've earned capital in this election, and I'm going to spend it"), but within just a few months that plan had run aground, too. House Republicans saw how terribly the policy was polling and lost their nerve. Meanwhile, more drones and private military contractors and Meals Ready-to-Eat flowed to Iraq and Afghanistan and points beyond. New programs offset cuts to old ones. Norquist was going to need a bigger bathtub.

Self-identified libertarians have always been tiny in number—a handful of economists, political activists, technologists, and true believers. But, in the decades after Ronald Reagan was elected President, they came to exert enormous political influence, in part because their prescription of prosperity through deregulation appeared to be working, and in part because they provided conservatism with a long-term agenda and a vision of a better future. To the usual right-wing mixture of social traditionalism and hierarchical nationalism, the libertarians had added an especially American sort of optimism: if the government would only step back and allow the market to organize society, we would truly flourish. When Bill Clinton pronounced the

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM MAIDA



"And here's what one of the world's greatest songs sounds like when I sing it."

era of big government over, in his 1996 State of the Union address, it operated as an ideological concession: Democrats would not aggressively defend the welfare state; they would accept that an era of small government had already begun. It almost seemed—as in the famous bathtub drowning scene in the movie "Les Diaboliques"—as if the Democrats and the Republicans had joined together in an effort to dispatch a shared problem.

Had you written a history of the libertarian movement fifteen years ago, it would have been a tale of improbable success. A small cadre of intellectually intense oddballs who inhabited a Manhattanish atmosphere of late-night living-room debates and barbed book reviews had somehow managed to impose their beliefs on a political party, then the country. A sympathetic historian might have emphasized the mass appeal of the ideals of free minds and free markets (as the libertarian writer Brian Doherty did in his comprehensive, still definitive work "Radicals for Capitalism," published in 2007), and a skeptical one might have focussed on the convenient way that the ideology advanced the business interests of billionaire backers such as the Koch brothers. But the story would have concerned a thriving idea.

The situation is no longer so simple. At first, the Republican backlash against Bush's heresies (the expensive prescription-drug benefit, the lack of progress against the national debt) cohered into the Tea Party and—once the G.O.P. establishment made its peace with the movement—into Paul Ryan's stint as Speaker, with its scolding fixation on debt reduction. But that period scarcely outlasted Ryan's Speakership. It was brought to an end by Barack Obama's crafty (and somewhat under-celebrated) reëlection campaign, in 2012, in which he effectively cast Romney-Ryan libertarianism as a stalking horse for plutocracy, rather than a leg up for small business, as Republicans claimed.

Doctrinal libertarianism hasn't disappeared from the political scene: it's easy enough to find right-of-center politicians insisting that government is too big. But, between Donald Trump and Ron DeSantis, libertarianism has given way to culture war as the right's dominant mode. To some libertarians—and liberals friendly to the cause—this is a development to lament, because it has stripped the American right of much of its idealism. Documenting the history of the libertarian movement now requires writing in the shadow of Trump, as two new books do. Together, they suggest that, since the end of the Cold War, libertarianism has remade American politics twice—first through its success and then through its failure.

In "The Individualists: Radicals, Reactionaries, and the Struggle for the Soul of Libertarianism" (Princeton), Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi argue that things didn't have to turn out this way. Zwolinski, a philosopher at the University of San Diego, and Tomasi, a political theorist at Brown, are both committed libertarians who are appalled at the movement's turn toward a harder-edged conservatism. (They are prominent figures in a faction called "bleeding-heart libertarianism.") Their book is a deep plunge into the archives, in search of a "primordial libertarianism" that preceded the Cold War. They contend that the profound skepticism toward government and the political absolutism that characterize libertarians have animated movements across the political spectrum, and have, in the past, sometimes led adherents in progressive directions rather than conservative ones. (In the call to defund the police, for instance, the authors identify a healthy skepticism of too much centralized government.) As they see it, libertarianism once had a left-of-center valence—and could still reclaim it.

If this sounds a little optimistic, it does make for an interesting historical account. The first thinker to self-identify as libertarian, the authors point out, was the French anarcho-communist Joseph Déjacque, who argued that "private property and the state were simply two different ways in which social relationships could become infused with hierarchy and

repression." Better to abolish both. The social Darwinist Herbert Spencer denounced imperialism's "deeds of blood and rapine"; the abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Lysander Spooner condemned slavery as an instance of the government's usurping natural rights. In the history of resistance to the modern state, Zwolinski and Tomasi see libertarians everywhere. This approach can sometimes come off as a land grab; my eyebrows went up when they claimed the abolitionist John Brown as a libertarian hero. Then again, Brown was a fiercely anti-government radical who sought to seize a federal armory to provision slaves for an uprising, so maybe it's not much of a stretch.

All this genealogy can seem a little notional, but certain suggestive rhythms recur: Zwolinski and Tomasi show how many thinkers return to personal liberty and the right to private property as bedrocks. That isn't only an American grammar—it comes from Locke and Mill, and, as "The Individualists" stresses, from some French sources, too—but it's the one in which the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights are written. Why do so many Americans own guns? Probably in part because gun ownership is protected in the Constitution. Such choices by the Founders don't make America a libertarian country, but they do insure that libertarians will be around for as long as the Constitution is.

Zwolinski and Tomasi emphasize the contingencies in libertarianism's history, but the most consequential contingency was the Cold War, which closely followed the publication, in 1944, of a core libertarian text, Friedrich Hayek's "The Road to Serfdom." An austere Austrian economist who taught at the London School of Economics, Hayek had become alarmed that so many left-of-center English thinkers were convinced that economic central planning ought to outlast the Second World War, becoming a permanent feature of government. Back in Vienna, Hayek and his mentors had studied central planning, and he believed that the English were being hopelessly naïve. His economic insight was that, when it came to information, no government planner, no matter how many studies he commissioned, could hope to match the market's efficiency in determining what people wanted. How much bread was needed, how many tires? Best to let the market work it out. The price system, Hayek wrote, "enables entrepreneurs, by watching the movement of comparatively few prices, as an engineer watches the hands of a few dials, to adjust their activities to those of their fellows." He coupled this insight with a warning: "Few are ready to recognize that the rise of fascism and naziism was not a reaction against the socialist trends of the preceding period but a necessary outcome of those tendencies."

"The Road to Serfdom," a text that relied on Austro-Hungarian historical experience to make a point about wartime English policy, was initially rejected by American publishers. But once it saw print, and won a rave in the *Times*, Hayek became a phenomenon. Anxious and unprepared, he was pushed by his publisher onto the stage at Town Hall, in New York City, to address an eager audience of American industrialists who were sick to death of Roosevelt. An abridged version was published by the *Reader's Digest* in the spring of 1945, and was then made available as a five-cent reprint through the Book-of-the-Month Club, which distributed more than half a million copies.

Hayek's work more or less invented libertarianism in twentieth-century America. As the Cold War wore on, his warnings about the perils of central planning gained urgency. Small libertarian think tanks, newspapers, and philanthropies appeared across the country through the nineteen-fifties.

Hayek's mentor, Ludwig von Mises, arrived in America and began teaching a seminar in Austrian economics, at



N.Y.U., underwritten by a businessman's fund. The movement was insular, fractious, New Yorkish. On West Eighty-eighth Street, a late-night salon convened in the apartment of Murray Rothbard, a student of von Mises's who had become the chief propagandist of libertarianism's extreme wing. (Robert Nozick, who became libertarianism's most important philosopher, dropped by.) In Murray Hill, Ayn Rand held post-midnight sessions with her own circle, which, at different times, included Alan Greenspan and Martin Anderson, who would become a leading domestic-policy adviser to Presidents Nixon and Reagan. Even to ideological allies, the Rand circle—in which everyone seemed to be in psychotherapy with the novelist's lover, Nathaniel Branden—appeared to be a cult. "What if, as so often happens, one didn't like, even couldn't stand, these people?" Rothbard asked.

Libertarian thinkers, on the page, tend to be prickly, disputatious, and drawn to absolutes, which is why they make for good copy. Those traits were deepened by an isolation from real power; they lorded over some small-circulation journals and a couple of budding think tanks, but that was basically it. Von Mises, among the crankiest of the originals, was once summoned to a small conference in Switzerland with a handful of libertarian grandees—the few other people on earth who actually agreed with him—and stormed out because they didn't agree with him enough. "You're all a bunch of socialists," he said. When Milton Friedman, the most urbane of the libertarian greats, published a pamphlet, in 1946, denouncing rent control, Rand fumed that he didn't go far enough: "Not one word about the inalienable right of landlords and property owners."

Rand's fixation on the basic rights of property owners was shared by Rothbard and Nozick, and together they created the characteristic late-twentieth-century form of libertarianism, as Andrew Koppelman, a law professor at Northwestern, argues in "Burning Down the House: How Libertarian Philosophy Was Corrupted by Delusion and Greed" (St. Martin's). These thinkers, Koppelman maintains, had a different goal than Hayek and Friedman did: shrinking government not to advance economic efficiency but to protect the rights of property owners. This was a critical distinction—to see each economic question as a matter of fundamental rights obliterated the possibility of compromise. Hayek, whom Koppelman admires, had written in favor of a "social minimum," which, though bare, made room for a welfare state. But as an economist,

Koppelman writes, Hayek had "no clear account of rights," which is why his approach was displaced by an uncompromising, rights-based liberalism.

Rand's novels helped formalize the movement's outright celebration of billionaires, and Nozick's book "Anarchy, State, and Utopia" (1974) argued that the state ought to have a minimal role—largely restricted to policing wrongdoing and curbing externalities—and that "taxation of earnings from labor is on a par with forced labor." Rothbard elaborated an absolutist theory of "anarcho-capitalism." This wasn't just a matter of shuttering the E.P.A.; there was to be no military, no police, no public schools. His libertarian vision ran closer to a state of nature. "The State is a group of plunderers," he wrote. Nothing should encroach upon "the absolute right to private property of every man."

Rothbard's absolutism didn't curb his influence, Koppelman maintains, but amplify it. It's true that, unlike Rand, Friedman, or Hayek, Rothbard never achieved a mass audience or a public profile, and he spent his life deep in libertarian circles. But within that movement he was ubiquitous (and known as Mr. Libertarian, Brian Doherty wrote), his reputation marked by his fierce dogmatism. Raised by successful immigrant parents in the Bronx, Rothbard was a youthful adherent of the isolationist Old Right, and, as an undergraduate at Columbia during the Second World War, on a liberal and pro-war campus, he would write, it seemed "that there was no hope and no ideological allies anywhere in the country." And he must have been just about the only Jewish New Yorker to back Strom Thurmond's 1948 Presidential candidacy on the States' Rights line. By the nineteen-sixties, Rothbard had fallen out with William F. Buckley, Jr.,'s *National Review*, for its support for the Cold War buildup, and for its frivolous inclination to abandon the real ideological fight against the state in an effort to preserve, as Rothbard put it, "tradition, order, Christianity and good manners."

It comes as a small shock when our libertarians emerge from the hothouse of theory and enter the world of power. One moment, recounted by Justin Raimondo in his book "An Enemy of the State," from 2000, stands out as particularly cinematic. In the winter of 1976—at a time when, two years after Richard Nixon's resignation as President, the Republican Party was in a state of profound flux—the billionaire Charles Koch hosted Rothbard at a ski lodge in Vail. Just getting to Colorado was a challenge for the indoorsy Rothbard, who had spent virtually his whole life in New York City and who suffered from a disabling fear of flying. (He had to be reassured by his wife that the lodge was probably not perched on the tip of a mountain and that he probably would not need to use a ski lift to reach it.) Koch, then in his early forties, was already a supporter of libertarian ventures, but in front of the lodge's immense stone fireplace Rothbard argued that the time was ripe for the movement to seek real power. Koch agreed, and the Cato Institute, which Koch largely underwrote and Rothbard named, opened the following year. Not that Rothbard was eager to reconcile with the mainstream. On the eve of the 1980 election, which would sweep libertarian ideas into the White House, Rothbard wrote, "The No. 1 threat . . . to the liberty of Americans in this campaign is *Ronald Reagan*."

One drawback of intellectual history, as a genre, is that you never get very far from the bookshelves. We are now on the eve of the Reagan revolution, and the reader of these books has seen Koch in the Vail lodge and Rothbard in his Upper West Side living room but—much like the latter—has seldom ventured from such cloisters. Reagan's election took place at the end of what was perhaps the greatest economic boom in world history, and all kinds of people had doubted whether the government could do things better than the private market. In Koppelman's telling, the libertarian story is about the takeover of the right by an intellectual fringe movement, so that many small-business owners and everyday skeptics of big government came to speak in the absolutist language of property rights. But there is also a shadow story, one that neither he nor Zwolinski and Tomasi really tell, in which the Democrats, during their long post-Cold War neoliberal phase, adopted some libertarian ideas and took up market logic, too. The imprint has lasted. The Democratic Party of today, with its base of support among the wealthiest and most successful of voters and its optimism about winning votes in the suburbs, would be hard to imagine if it hadn't embraced wealth and capitalism. Late-twentieth-century libertarianism reshaped not just the right but mainstream liberalism, too.

By the early twenty-first century, you could see just how much. Koppelman began to study libertarianism, he writes, when he was asked, in 2010, to explain the "constitutional challenges to Obamacare." When he read the arguments and the district-court decisions upholding them, he was appalled. Against the individual mandate, they invoked what Koppelman calls a "previously unheard of" right: that of a taxpayer not to be compelled to pay for a service he does not want. The case didn't actually hinge on any such assertion, but during oral arguments Justice Samuel Alito implied something similar. From the bench, Alito asked, "Isn't it the case that what this mandate is really doing is not requiring the people who are subject to it to pay for the services that they are going to consume? It is requiring them to subsidize services that will be received by somebody else." Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg replied, "If you're going to have insurance, that's how insurance works." Her side prevailed narrowly, 5–4.

The doctrinal libertarians never really solved a basic political problem: they didn't have the numbers. Despite all the fanciful talk of founding an offshore nation called Minerva, in the nineteen-seventies, or the tech billionaire Peter Thiel's support for a "seasteading" venture in the twenty-tens, there simply isn't a no-government or even minimal-state utopia anywhere in the world. The Free State Project, a Yale graduate student's attempt to persuade enough libertarians to move to New Hampshire to take it over politically, has claimed just six thousand migrants since 2001, and its political effect has been limited to a failed effort to cut the budget of a rural school district. If markets reveal preferences, no one wants to live a Rothbardian life.

Rothbard's own response to this reality was to evangelize for alliances with other extremists. In the Vietnam era, he wrote for the left-wing magazine *Ramparts* and courted Black nationalists, arguing that they shared common enemies in the police and the military. That didn't get very far. Then Rothbard became en-

thralled with David Duke's 1991 campaign for governor, in Louisiana, and thought he saw a glimpse of the future. "Note the excitement," he wrote. For better or worse, Rothbard insisted, libertarianism had become the philosophy of the élite that it had once aspired to destroy. "The proper strategy for the right wing," he argued, "must be what we can call 'right-wing populism': exciting, dynamic, tough, and confrontational, rousing and inspiring not only the exploited masses, but the often-shell-shocked right-wing intellectual cadre as well." He laid out a right-wing populist program: abolish the Fed and slash taxes and welfare, but also "Crush Criminals" by unleashing cops to "administer instant punishment." To carry out this agenda, Rothbard thought, the right needed a "dynamic, charismatic leader who has the ability to short-circuit the media elites, and to reach and rouse the masses directly."

When Rothbard died, in 1995, these late-life turns had fixed his reputation as a racist crank. After Trump's ascendance, which pretty well expressed what Rothbard meant by right-wing populism, that reputation was modified a little—racist crank/seer. Rothbard had evidently glimpsed what was to come. In a study of his influence, the sociologist Melinda Cooper observed, "Wherever they have ended up, almost every leading figure on the alt-right started out as an acolyte." The critic John Ganz wrote in 2017 that Steve Bannon's "fusion of libertarianism and populism" seems "Rothbardian in inspiration." That Rothbard was so combative gives the veneer of ideological purity to everything he did. But what to make of someone who sought an alliance with Black nationalists by denouncing the violence of the police and then, when the political tides shifted, sought an alliance with the far right by arguing that the police should beat up criminals and vagrants? These aren't the maneuvers of a purist. They are power plays, and they stem from a recognition of political weakness: like a remora, libertarianism had to attach itself to a host.

Ever since the George W. Bush Administration, the libertarian movement, as such, has been disintegrating. The pattern is visible even within its citadel, the Cato Institute. In 2009, Thiel, a devoted libertarian, published an essay on Cato's Web site saying he had lost all hope that the United States would ever be a libertarian country. "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible," he wrote. The following year, a Cato vice-president named Brink Lindsey announced that he was leaving the institute; he eventually broke with libertarianism. Lindsey later complained that many libertarians came, opportunistically, to suspend their skepticism of the government in its "most coercive" forms—the police and the military—even while continuing to supply "the corrosive acid of derision and mistrust with which conservatives and Republicans have been pressure-washing the country's governing institutions for decades now." The billionaire headed out farther toward nationalism; the wonk turned back to something like neoliberalism.

These valedictory essays, by Thiel and by Lindsey, strike a mournful tone, as the intellectual histories by Kopelman and by Zwolinski and Tomasi sometimes do: shut the door softly, turn off the lights, and accept that something great is over. But this is a weird time for elegies, as the laissez-faire credo still suffuses much of the political spectrum. On the center-left, there is barely a whisper of the old enthusiasm for central planning that so spooked Hayek, and Democratic politicians routinely praise government programs for giving citizens the freedom to do as they please. On the right, a colloquial libertarianism is everywhere. The fights against masks and vaccines, against teaching about gender and race in schools, and against "cancel culture" and programs promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion typically strike as a defense of individual rights—Don't Tread on Me. The radical zero-government doctrine of Rothbard and Norquist turned out to be mismatched, in ways that took a few decades to become apparent, with the everyday American allergy to authority. But even with their policy program in temporary retreat libertarians have left the contemporary right with its defining characteristic: an instinct for absolutism. ♦







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A CRITIC AT LARGE

PLEASANT SORROWS

The mysticism of Paul Simon.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH



Simon says, of his musical quest, "I'm looking for the edge of what you can hear."

On January 15, 2019, Paul Simon dreamed that he was working on a piece called "Seven Psalms." He got out of bed and scribbled the phrase—alliterative, ancient-feeling—into a spiral notebook. From then on, Simon periodically woke between 3:30 and 5 A.M. to jot down bits of language. Songwriters often speak about their work as a kind of channelling—the job is to be a steady antenna, prepared to receive strange signals. Some messages are more urgent than others. Simon started trying to make sense of what he was being told.

This month, Simon, who is eighty-one, released "Seven Psalms," his fifteenth solo album. It's a beautiful, mysterious record, composed of a single, thirty-three-minute acoustic track divided into seven movements. Simon's soft, neighborly voice has yet to be shredded by age or hard living, and its sustained tenderness makes me feel as though everything is going to be O.K. His long discography contains threads of sorrow ("Hello darkness, my old friend," the gloomy opening line of "The Sound of Silence," from 1964, has been adopted as a meme), but just as many moments of levity and gratification. Despite being a songwriting virtuoso, Simon tends toward understatement, and his lack of vocal histrionics can make his music seem unusually (and deceptively) effortless.

"Seven Psalms" is a series of hymns, but somehow it feels imprecise to call the piece religious. When it comes to the fallibility of the body and the enigma of the spirit, Simon, who is Jewish, does not seem beholden to any one world view. In interviews, he has been adamant about the fact that his cosmology is not organized. "I'm not a doctor or a preacher/I've no particular guiding star," he sings on "My Professional Opinion." Instead, "Seven Psalms" is focussed on a more expansive, open-ended notion of God. Simon has described the piece as "an argument I'm having with myself about belief—or not." Over and over, he imagines a divine presence, and then interrogates its borders. "The Lord is my engineer/The Lord is the earth I ride on," he sings on "The Lord." He returns to the construction in a refrain, finding the sacred everywhere and nowhere:

> The Lord is a puff of smoke
> That disappears when the wind blows
> The Lord is my personal joke
> My reflection in the window

Outside religious spaces, posing the big questions—how we arrived here; what we're supposed to do with the time we've been allotted—is generally considered the terrain of undergraduate philosophy majors and people who have gravely misjudged their tolerance for edibles. Western culture has tidied and sanitized the moments (childbirth, death) that truly force the inquiry. In the delivery room, a mother might only be granted a dazed hour to cradle her newborn before everyone is cleaned up and wheeled off. Death is medicalized; the deepest mourning happens mostly in private. Yet once you become awake to the puzzle of existence, via loss or its opposite, it can be extremely difficult to think about anything else. On "Love Is Like a Braid," Simon sings of being undone by such an event:

> I lived a life of pleasant sorrows
> Until the real deal came
> Broke me like a twig in a winter gale
> Called me by my name

Partway through the verse, an elegant guitar figure is punctuated by a crash, signalling a moment of transformation. People who have endured a major loss—the real deal—often speak about feeling reborn in its wake. Simon is not explicit about what might have happened, but it seems he was left in a state of earnest wondering.

ILLUSTRATION BY LOU BENESCH

A trailer for the release of "Seven Psalms" includes footage from "In Restless Dreams," a forthcoming documentary. In it, Simon talks about making music as reaching for something that might not be reachable; it might not even exist. For Simon, the riddle of his work—why, for example, a toy harmonica might sound better than a grand piano, or a major chord might do something a minor chord can't—runs parallel to his spiritual quest. "I'm looking for the edge of what you can hear," he says. "I can just about hear it, but I can't quite. That's the thing I want." He pauses. "How do you get there?"

Simon has always been a seeker. In 1968, Simon & Garfunkel released "America," a haunting song about being young, bewildered, and hungry:

> "Kathy, I'm lost," I said, though I knew she was sleeping
> "I'm empty and aching and I don't know why"

Over time, his concerns became more existential. On "The Only Living Boy in New York," from 1970, he admits, "Half of the time we're gone, but we don't know where." Pilgrimage, homecoming, and absolution became recurring themes. On "American Tune," from "There Goes Rhymin' Simon" (1973), he sings about death as a glorious release:

> And I dreamed I was dying
> I dreamed that my soul rose unexpectedly
> And looking back down at me
> Smiled reassuringly

The melody of "American Tune" was inspired by "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," a seventeenth-century hymn built around a medieval Latin poem that describes Christ's body on the Cross. It's not the only explicitly Christian material tucked into Simon's discography. On "Getting Ready for Christmas Day," a track from 2011, Simon lifts chunks of a sermon from the Reverend J. M. Gates, a Baptist preacher who released 78-r.p.m. records from the twenties to the forties. (In a 2011 interview, Simon tells a story about Paul McCartney showing up backstage after one of Simon's shows and joking, "Aren't you Jewish?")

Even "Graceland" (1986) expresses a deep interest in, well, grace. The estate is protected by a white pearly gate; Elvis Presley and several of his family members are buried in a small cemetery adjacent to the mansion; fans send ephemera to decorate the graves. Simon sings of being pulled there by some preternatural force: "For reasons I cannot explain/There's some part of me wants to see Graceland." For me, the most interesting nod to religion comes on "The Obvious Child," a propulsive, charismatic cut from "The Rhythm of the Saints" (1990). Simon sings:

> And we said, "These songs are true
> These days are ours
> These tears are free,"
> And hey
> The cross is in the ballpark

The final line of the verse can be read in several ways. Perhaps Simon is suggesting that we're capable of locating God in anything we love, including baseball. Perhaps he's making a point about how religion is inextricably stitched into the cultural fabric of America. It may be an allusion to Pope Paul VI holding Mass at Yankee Stadium, in 1965. He could be saying that, although Christianity is not foolproof, it's close enough. Or maybe he's simply suggesting that faith—in the world, in ourselves—is always within reach. We're never so far from mercy.

It would be tempting to compare "Seven Psalms" to Leonard Cohen's "You Want It Darker" or David Bowie's "Blackstar," two albums, both from 2016, that tussle with mortality. Yet Cohen and Bowie each knew an end was imminent. Simon appears to be in good health. "My hand's steady, my mind's still clear," he sings on "Wait." It's plain from the lyrics on "Seven Psalms" that Simon's domestic life is a sustaining force. He has a house in the Texas Hill Country with his wife, the singer Edie Brickell. "Heaven is beautiful," he sings in the piece's final movement. "It's almost like home." Death is on his mind, but it has always been on his mind. On "Your Forgiveness," he sings:

> I, I have my reasons to doubt
> A white light eases the pain
> Two billion heartbeats and out
> Or does it all begin again?

"Seven Psalms" begins and ends with bells, which evoke church, certainly, but also a sense of ritual. Much of the instrumentation, which includes gamelan, gongs, harmonium, flute, and glockenspiel, feels out of time, nearly ahistorical, as though it predated our existence and will remain long after we're gone. Drums were once a cornerstone of Simon's repertoire, from the cavernous snare strike in the chorus of "The Boxer" (delivered by the beloved session drummer Hal Blaine, who set up his kit near an elevator shaft) to the vibrant Brazilian percussion Simon used on "The Rhythm of the Saints." (In 1990, Simon told the *Times* that the title "The Rhythm of the Saints" came from the belief that "the holy spirit was inside the drums used in the rituals of religions . . . that syncretized African deities with Catholic saints.") "Seven Psalms," though, is not particularly interested in groove. It aims instead to elicit a mood of gentle contemplation.

Simon's willingness to engage so directly with unanswerable questions is bold; his inquiries linger in the air, like warm mist after a summer storm. In the wake of the pandemic, it can sometimes feel as though Americans have become more proudly reclusive, less open to the benefits of community. Yet, for Simon, the distance between people has never been less significant. "It seems to me/We're all walking down the same road," he sings on "Trail of Volcanoes," over anxious strings. "Seven Psalms" made me think of the Trappist monk, poet, and mystic Thomas Merton, who wrote often about the loneliness of our path to comprehending the sublime. "Although men have a common destiny, each individual also has to work out his own personal salvation for himself in fear and trembling," he observed. Merton also believed that it was possible to see God everywhere. "We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and God is shining through it all the time," he said, in 1965. Merton was a Catholic, but he seems to be saying that God—whatever, whoever that might mean—will always appear to a person who is looking. In fact, Merton was sure of it: "This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true." ♦

MUSICAL EVENTS

THE PIT AND THE PODIUM

Gustavo Dudamel, at the Philharmonic, and Nathalie Stutzmann, at the Met.

BY ALEX ROSS



Gustavo Dudamel may be the most famous conductor alive, but the second coming of Leonard Bernstein he is not. Such was the import of an ominously neutral, nondescript performance of Mahler's Ninth Symphony which Dudamel elicited from the New York Philharmonic on May 20th. Any conductor with glimmerings of charisma is automatically likened to Bernstein, who embodied classical music for several generations of listeners. Although the comparison never does anyone favors, in this case there is no avoiding it. In February, it was announced that Dudamel, who currently leads the Los Angeles Philharmonic, will become the music director of the New York Philharmonic in 2026, inheriting a mantle that Bernstein once wore with immense élan. Others who held the post are Toscanini, Boulez, and Mahler himself.

The Ninth triggered several of Bernstein's most soul-shuddering interpretations. There are recordings of him conducting the piece with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and with the Philharmonics of New York, Vienna, Berlin, and Israel. Histrionics aside, these documents shed valuable light on the score itself, since Bernstein paid scrupulous attention to its minutest markings. Consider how he builds the huge opening paragraph of the first movement, in which a gently swaying theme is unfurled, enriched, darkened, magnified, and left hanging. Each time through, he makes sure that the players observe the accents and phrasings that delineate this evolution. When the harmony sinks from D major to D minor, the melody takes on a more jagged, unsettled character. The ensuing restatement of the theme, in full-throated cry, is like an overcoming of crisis—and Mahler's journey into the abyss is only just beginning.

Little of that came through in Dudamel's reading. The first phrase had a placid, humdrum air. In the turn to D minor, the articulation remained more or less the same, smooth rather than effortful. At the height of that section, Mahler inserts grace notes before wide leaps in the first violins—the bow glancing against lower strings on the instrument. Under Dudamel, those effects were almost imperceptible: the line kept pressing forward, with no particular urgency. The score is peppered with instructions along the lines of "expressively," "with rage," "violently breaking out," "with deep feeling." At the Philharmonic, none of this registered to any significant degree. To be sure, the performance did not lack for ear-flattening sonic force, the climaxes made hard and cold by the problematic new acoustics of Geffen Hall.

In the second movement, Dudamel came moderately alive, giving proper oomph to Mahler's thumping country-dance rhythms. The Rondo-Burleske reverted to machinelike virtuosity, its gnashing irony and rancor sidelined. In the final Adagio, the Philharmonic strings produced a handsome, burnished sound, yet there was no undertow of valedictory passion, no time-stopping heartbreak at the end. If Dudamel intended to fashion a strictly classical, anti-sentimental reading of the Ninth, in diametrical contrast to Bernstein's heart-on-sleeve manner, he succeeded all too well. The symphony was impeccably played, interpretively lucid, and emotionally inert—the antithesis not only of Bernstein but of Mahler.

What this misfire portends is hard to say. At the L.A. Phil, Dudamel has

Dudamel's reading of Mahler's Ninth was curiously inert.

 ILLUSTRATION BY SEB AGRESTI

routinely delivered performances of outward vigor, even when they lack structural cohesion or expressive depth. I have never found him clinical and detached, as he was at the New York Philharmonic. His relationship with the orchestra has, of course, many years to grow, and he will learn to compensate for the inherent chilliness of Geffen. Still, I expected more of a spark of initial excitement, not to mention a stronger engagement with the local Mahler tradition. I can't help thinking of what Bernstein once said to the Vienna Philharmonic: "You can play the notes—that I know. It is Mahler who is missing."

A more impressive podium feat took place the same weekend at the Metropolitan Opera: Nathalie Stutzmann, a contralto turned conductor, presided over "The Magic Flute" on Friday evening and "Don Giovanni" on Saturday afternoon. Both productions are new to the Met: Simon McBurney directed the first, Ivo van Hove the second. Stutzmann is also new to the roster, and her kinetic, stylish approach to Mozart strikes home. She applies lessons from the early-music movement in minimizing string vibrato, so that Sarastro's ceremonies take on a Baroque majesty. Yet she doesn't stint on the proto-Romantic roar of the Don's descent to Hell.

The Met had long been in dire need of a workable "Don Giovanni." Three previous stagings, by Franco Zeffirelli, Marthe Keller, and Michael Grandage, fell flat. Van Hove's version, which was first seen at the Paris Opera, in 2019, has broken the curse, even if its relentless, nearly colorless austerity wears thin over three hours. The sets, by Jan Versweyveld, evoke Renaissance buildings rendered in brutalist concrete, in the manner of the Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa. An D'Huys, the costume designer, dresses the Don and his flunky, Leporello, as business bros. None of this is fresh if you've spent time on the European opera circuit, but the definition of the characters and the action is admirably clear. For the hellish climax, van Hove and his projection designer, Christopher Ash, have devised a genuinely eerie vision: grainy footage of hundreds of naked bodies writhing in mud, perhaps of the boiling variety.

"The Magic Flute" has had better luck at the Met: David Hockney's rich-hued ritual of 1991, Julie Taymor's kaleidoscopic puppet show of 2004. McBurney's staging, which originated at the Dutch National Opera, in 2012, confines itself largely to black-and-white. ("Mozart without color" was apparently the memo this month.) Austerity is not in evidence, however; a frantic, let's-put-on-a-show spirit prevails. Stationed to the left of the proscenium is a visual artist, Blake Habermann, whose captions and sketches are projected live. On the right side is a Foley artist, Ruth Sullivan, who provides all manner of sound effects, from cascades of celestial thunder to Papageno peeing in a wine bottle. Performers run up and down the aisles and gather around the orchestra. Thomas Oliemans, who sings Papageno, clowns tirelessly, at one point forcing an entire row of operagoers to stand as he makes his way across the auditorium.

The ultimate test of a staging is not its intrinsic entertainment value but its suitability as an arena for voices. On that score, the "Don Giovanni" triumphs: the high, gray walls serve as an excellent acoustical chamber, allowing singers to project without undue effort. The "Flute," on the other hand, often places the performers on a suspended platform, with cavernous space all around. Even worse, the dialogue that connects the arias is amplified. Whenever the singers stop speaking and start singing, their voices sound small by comparison. Also disconcerting is the decision to have the dialogue delivered in German, even though there are no native German speakers in the cast. Better to have presented the entire piece in English, without amplification. Mozart could not have imagined his populist singspiel as an art object in a foreign language.

The Met, which has the pick of the world's singers, fields strong casts for both operas. I wondered, though, about the most conspicuous choice. The Swedish baritone Peter Mattei has been the company's leading Don Giovanni for two decades, and his voice has lost nothing in lustre over the years. His Champagne Aria still pops; his "Là ci darem la mano" is liquid seduction. Yet the starkness of van Hove's staging calls for more actorly intensity than Mattei supplies. What drives the Don's compulsion to rape and kill? The implication here is that men in suits are all like that. Perhaps so, but I'd love to see others take a crack at the part—in particular, Kyle Ketelsen, a brilliant singer-actor who deserves better roles at the Met. Certainly, Ketelsen could have sung a more persuasive Leporello than did the gruffly adequate Adam Plachetka.

The remainder of the "Don" cast—Ben Bliss, as Don Ottavio; Federica Lombardi, as Donna Anna; Ana María Martínez, as Donna Elvira; Ying Fang, as Zerlina; Alfred Walker, as Masetto—sing with style and verve. No "Don" can spook its audience without a granite-voiced Commendatore, and the Ukrainian bass-baritone Alexander Tsymbalyuk fits the bill as well as anyone I've heard since Matti Salminen. For the "Flute," too, the Met has first-rate artists on hand: Lawrence Brownlee, as Tamino; Erin Morley, as Pamina; Stephen Milling, as Sarastro. Kathryn Lewek has sung the Queen of the Night more than three hundred times around the world, and there is a reason that opera houses keep calling her in: she executes this stratospherically difficult role better than anyone alive. It's not simply a matter of the pinpoint high F's; it's the dramatic urgency that she brings to them, translating virtuosity into rage.

If the new "Flute" makes life challenging for the singers, it does something delightful for the members of the Met orchestra. The ensemble is raised so that it sits just below stage level, and you can see the musicians as they work—and as they take in the action. Furthermore, several players are roped into the shenanigans. The flutist Seth Morris climbs onstage to enact the titular instrument, and Bryan Wagorn, an assistant conductor at the Met, finds himself pestered by Oliemans as he performs glockenspiel solos. Oliemans also snaps at the trumpets for playing Sarastro's fanfare too loudly; in response, they gesture impatiently toward the score. Mozart might well have found this joke hilarious. ♦

POP MUSIC

SHOOTING STAR

Christine and the Queens' restless self-inventions.

BY HANIF ABDURRAQIB



The origin story of Christine and the Queens involves the loneliness inflicted by a double cleaving. In 2010, Héloïse Letissier, a twenty-two-year-old from Nantes, was expelled from a theatre conservatory in Paris on the heels of a disorienting breakup. He made his way to London and stumbled one night into the legendary Soho club Madame Jojo's. The exhilarating drag shows he saw there inspired him to create a stage persona—Christine—to free himself from the collision of uncertainties that defined his real life. For Héloïse, anguish may have been an inflexible, immovable object, but Christine could mold it into whatever form felt useful. This kind of generative shape-shifting would become the engine for Letissier's musical career.

In 2014, Christine and the Queens' French album début, "Chaleur Humaine" ("Human Warmth"), became a runaway hit; the following year, a self-titled version appeared in the U.S., with many of the lyrics reworked into English. The songs had infectious hooks and shimmering electronic instrumentation. Back then, Letissier used feminine pronouns, but he was already casting off the strictures of gender. The opening song of the début album, "iT," was a danceable tune in which bright drops of synthesizer rained into caverns of pulsating bass. The lyrics were a priapic fantasy: "I'll rule over all my dead impersonations / 'Cause I've got it / I'm a man now." I saw Christine and the Queens perform in 2015, in New York, and recall how hard-earned those declarations seemed to be. Christine—petite, lithe, androgynous—seemed at ease in a dark suit, standing at the front of the stage or dancing in a wash of blue light. But there were moments when the line between Letissier's different selves blurred. During one rapturous wave of applause, he teared up, then apologized for the lapse, admitting, "I wanted to be fierce."

Letissier's early work established a maximalist production style: large splashes of electronic sound, swelling arrangements. A follow-up album in 2018, "Chris," conjured memories of eighties pop, from Madonna's "Lucky Star" to Michael Jackson's most opulent hits. That album also introduced a new version of Letissier, who now wore his hair shorn and went by Chris. Where the début was warm and tender, "Chris" was defined by machismo and eroticism, a relentless pursuit of physicality. "Don't feel like a girlfriend / But lover / Damn, I'd be your lover," Letissier sang on the single "Girlfriend." Then, in 2019, Letissier's mother died, and afterward, while wandering the streets of Los Angeles, he kept noticing red cars, which he interpreted as a sign, an angel nudging him toward yet another new identity. For his third album, "Redcar les adorables étoiles (prologue)," released in 2022, Letissier was Redcar, an enigmatic figure who performed wearing a crimson glove. The persona within a persona offered Letissier an even more expansive creative playground, but the album's conceptual framework felt stretched a touch too thin. Its thirteen tracks, almost all in French, explored filial grief, trans experience, and romantic rupture through a tangle of abstract imagery. The pop elements of Letissier's sound were muted, and the album's sparse sonic beauty was sometimes eclipsed by its thematic busyness.

Perhaps the problem was that "Redcar" wasn't meant to stand on its own. As the title suggested, it was conceived as a prologue, the beginning of a project yet to come. That follow-up, "Paranoïa, Angels, True Love," out June 9th, is both more sprawling than "Redcar"—

The new album "Paranoïa, Angels, True Love" is a dreamy epic.

ILLUSTRATION BY NICOLE RIFKIN

twenty tracks spanning nearly ninety minutes—and more unified. Letissier has described it as the second part of an "operatic gesture" inspired by "Angels in America," and it is structured, somewhat showily, in three movements ("Paranoïa," "Angels," and "True Love"), as if it were a theatrical production. But the album feels less like an opera than like the score for a film epic, a patient and pleading unfurling of atmospheric sounds. And though the new album is not a neon-fuelled ode to sweating out heartbreak, as "Chris" was, there is still enough here that might summon one to dance.

As on "Redcar," Letissier worked on "P.A.T.L." with Mike Dean, a pop producer known for collaborations with the likes of Kanye West, Beyoncé, and Madonna. Dean set up a studio in Letissier's home, in L.A., and had him record his vocals in single takes just after waking up in the morning. This process helps lend the album a dreamlike feel, as if Letissier were guiding the listener from one somnambulation to the next. The dominant sounds are lush strings, prolonged electronic moans, and hypnotic percussion. Letissier's singing often sounds like several voices coming from different directions. A conversational songwriter, he turns toward the listener with lyrical inquiries. "Do you want to feel the sun / But the sun from underwater?" he sings on "A day in the water." Still, "P.A.T.L." prioritizes the beauty of sound itself over the clarity of language—which, too, is a little bit like the nature of dreaming.

Letissier has a knowing relationship to musical icons of the past. Onstage, moving through fluid choreography in tailored suits, he can evoke both Michael Jackson and Fred Astaire. A couple of years ago, he recorded a cover of George Michael's queer anthem "Freedom." For "P.A.T.L.," he recruited Madonna to appear on three tracks as a kind of omniscient narrator. "Do you suffer from loneliness? This is the voice of the big simulation," she intones on the song "I met an angel." In the liner notes, Letissier describes Madonna's presence on the album as perhaps that of an A.I., or an angel, or a mother—one artist of self-reinvention there to nurture another. But what struck me most about the role was its narrow specificity. Letissier wanted the anointment of pop's matriarch, but he didn't feel the need to give her, say, a proper guest verse or chorus.

The album's three movements are not rigorously defined; a listener probably wouldn't be able to delineate them without studying the track list. But there is a claustrophobia to some of the songs in the first section—like the brilliantly messy "Track 10," featuring eleven minutes of cascading yells and crashing drums—that lets up as the album continues. "I feel like an angel," from the "True Love" section, is the penultimate track, and, without all that came before, some of its lyrics might sound like those of any other platitudinous love song. "I feel like an angel . . . every time he touches me," Letissier sings. Coming after a section of the album devoted to angels, though, those words complete a narrative arc. There is a higher place that for most of the album seems far away, a place for other people but not for our hero, who is drowning in his "earthy appetites." And then, just before the exit, a ladder appears.

"P.A.T.L." is ultimately interested in the most elemental questions, among them, What are we to do with all this grief and longing? "Take my sorrow," Letissier implores on a song titled "He's been shining forever, your son." I lost my own mother when I was young, and five years ago, when I realized that I could no longer remember the sound of her voice, it felt like another funeral. The gift, though, is that I can now be convinced that I hear her everywhere. "P.A.T.L." is an album concerned with such omnipresence, with the reality of grief as a thing that shifts within us. It is sometimes a dormant tenant and sometimes an overbearing landlord. The ache is ever present. It decides when to come and collect. But it would only be foolish for us to push aside our hungers and yearnings in the hope of circumventing some potential future pain.

Listening to "P.A.T.L.," I thought about what some might call the alter ego—Christine, Chris, Redcar. Yes, Letissier is an artist who, like many queer artists before him, expands the possibilities of his work by choosing to become someone new. But he is also stepping into a new self to better make sense of all that his past selves have been through. People do this organically, without putting a name to it. I've left behind my recklessly grieving self many times, but he is still there, waiting for me to return with the good news of whatever revelations I've had since we last met. In "Paranoïa, Angels, True Love," Letissier's constellations of identities move toward and away from one another, forming fresh, evolving shapes and building space for others yet to come. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Dan Misdea, must be received by Sunday, June 4th. The finalists in the May 22nd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 19th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" .... "

THE FINALISTS



"Do you take last requests?"
Kurt Rossetti, San Rafael, Calif.

"It's time you retire, Keith."
Beth Lawler, Montclair, N.J.

"Don't make me get my banjo."
Kathy Wrobel-Cornell, East Hartland, Conn.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Look! The first Robinsons of spring."
Alex Jones, Montreal, Quebec

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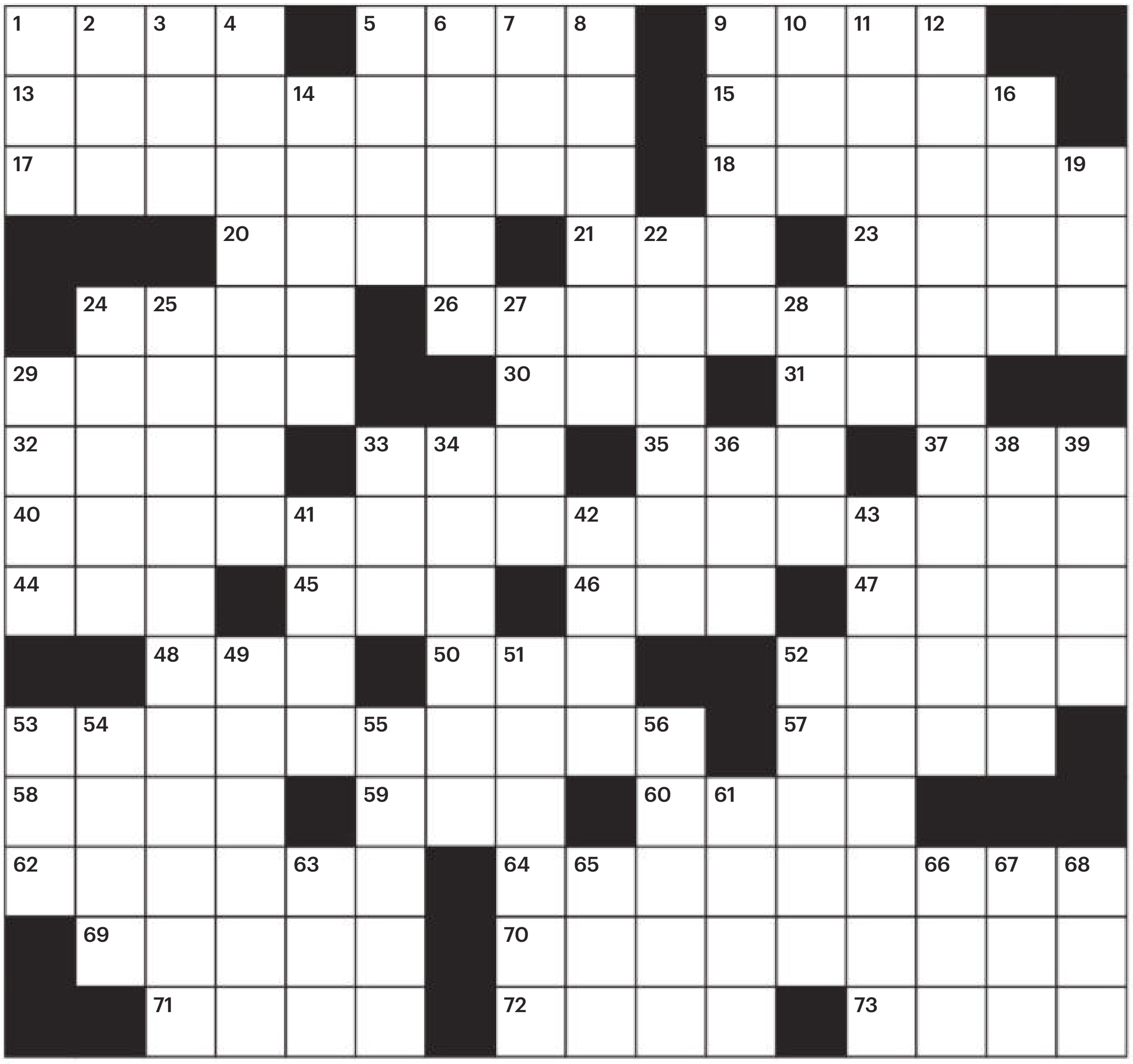
Scan to shop.

PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

BROKEN RECORDS

A themed crossword.

BY ROSS TRUDEAU



ACROSS

1 Jabba, for one, in "Star Wars"
5 Reception dishes, briefly
9 "What ___ God wrought?"
13 "God willing," in Arabic
15 Harpo Productions founder, familiarly
17 2009 No. 1 hit for Lady Gaga [*P-p-p-*]
18 Confiscates
20 Read, as a QR code
21 Narc (on)
23 Autos in a series of "art cars" painted by Andy Warhol and Jenny Holzer, among others
24 Opening of "The Super Mario Bros. Movie"?
26 1966 No. 2 hit for the Beach Boys [*Ba-ba-ba-ba-*]
29 Swollen
30 Follower of ad or Mad
31 Descriptor for some radio stations
32 Diva's opportunity to shine
33 Vaccine-watchdog org.
35 Go (for)
37 Novelty clothing item, at times
40 1974 No. 1 hit for Elton John [*B-b-b-*]
44 Band performance
45 Next-___ (advanced, as tech)
46 Mac platform with Yosemite and El Capitan versions
47 Direction of most morning traffic on the George Washington Bridge
48 "The White Lotus" network
50 Three-time Emmy winner Aduba
52 Small character in "Monsters, Inc."?
53 1976 début single by the Runaways [*Ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-ch-*]
57 Church niche
58 Total doofus
59 Fair-hiring inits.
60 "___ boy!"
62 Single-masted boats
64 1979 No. 1 hit for the Knack [*M-m-m-*]
69 "The Chiffon Trenches" author ___ Leon Talley
70 Decline dessert, perhaps
71 Some co-parents
72 No mere talker
73 Asian cryptid

DOWN

1 Certain joint . . . or like some joints
2 Article in *El País*
3 Judgy cluck
4 Serious player
5 It comes before Bravo
6 Second course?
7 End Citizens United, for one
8 Shepherd who hosts a namesake daytime talk show
9 Shade-loving plant
10 Imitate
11 ___ sovereignty (subject in Native American law)
12 Some waste-removal crews
14 Rainbow-shaped
16 Chopped
19 I.R.S. I.D.
22 Brothers' keepers?
24 Prep, as baby food
25 Words from a hot athlete
27 "The Traitors" host Cumming
28 Tempo
29 Browser accumulation
33 Expense
34 Budapest-Vienna connector
36 Southwestern hub, for short
38 "I'm the problem, ___" (lyric in Taylor Swift's "Anti-Hero")
39 "*¿Cómo ___ usted?*"
41 "The Rite of Spring" composer Stravinsky
42 Ruination
43 Game show won forty straight times by Amy Schneider
49 Large group of cicadas that emerged in 2021
51 Met remotely, in a way
52 Board game also called Settlers
53 Jane Pauley's network
54 "*Buenos días*"
55 Go-aheads
56 Tend to, as a turkey
61 "___ she blows!"
63 Ahead of, informally
65 Longtime Rocket Ming
66 Reward for those who dig deep?
67 Fiend
68 DiFranco of Righteous Babe Records

Solution to the previous puzzle:

■	H	A	H	■	M	A	G	I	■	C	A	W	E	D
P	A	S	A	■	E	R	I	C	■	A	C	H	O	O
A	G	A	R	■	R	U	N	E	■	P	R	I	N	T
C	U	D	D	L	E	B	U	D	D	I	E	S	■	■
T	E	A	S	E	S	A	P	A	R	T	■	P	O	P
■	■	■	A	N	T	■	N	E	A	T	E	N	S	■
I	T	A	L	O	■	L	O	C	A	L	A	R	E	A
T	A	D	A	■	T	O	W	E	D	■	K	E	P	T
S	L	U	M	P	O	V	E	R	■	F	I	R	M	S
M	O	L	I	E	R	E	■	■	B	U	N	■	■	■
E	N	T	■	R	U	N	A	L	O	N	G	N	O	W
■	■	H	O	U	S	E	H	O	L	D	N	A	M	E
B	L	O	G	S	■	S	O	R	T	■	O	V	A	L
B	I	O	R	E	■	T	R	E	E	■	T	E	N	D
C	E	D	E	D	■	S	A	N	D	■	E	L	I	■

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